A LIFE EXPERIENCE
The Shaun Apple Story
SHAUN J APPLE
I was supposed to disappear.
This is what happened instead.
LOVE ACROSS BORDERS PUBLISHING

**SHAUN J APPLE**

*Sharing slices of Life Experience*

by

Shaun J Apple

LOVE ACROSS BORDERS
PUBLISHING

**A Life Experience: The Shaun Apple Story**

MASTERPIECE EDITION

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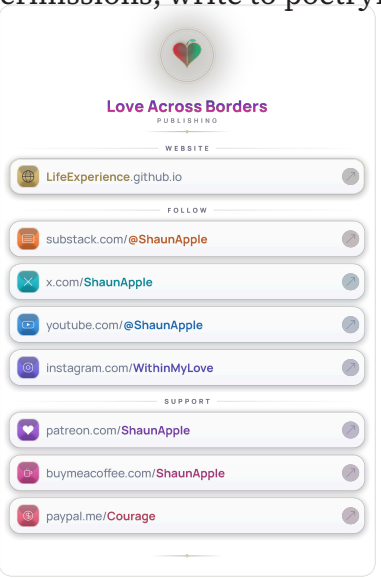


**Author's Note on Identities & Sources**

This is a work of nonfiction based on my lived experiences, journals, messages, photographs, official records, and contemporaneous notes.

To protect the privacy of people who are not public figures, some names and identifying details (such as jobs, locations, and relationships) have been changed, combined, or omitted. When I describe conduct that could be construed as unlawful or tortious by a private individual, I do so as my recollection and opinion, grounded where possible in documents or corroboration. Law-enforcement interactions are reported as I experienced them—what was said or done in my presence—without assigning motives to any individual.

Memory is a moving thing. Where I rely on memory, I've aimed to verify the who, what, and when with written artifacts; where verification was impossible or conflicting, I say so in the text. Direct quotations appear within quotation marks; close paraphrases are indicated by context. Screenshots, emails, and other private communications are summarized or excerpted with the minimum necessary to preserve meaning and protect privacy.

My intent is not to injure reputations, but to tell the truth of a life as fully and fairly as I can. Any errors are mine, and I will correct material mistakes in future editions.

This book is offered in the spirit of harm reduction and survivor solidarity. If a passage reads like instruction rather than description, treat it as the latter, and please seek professional advice before acting on anything herein.

# Life Contents

**Chapter 1:**
A Child Showered With Scorn . . . . . 1

**Chapter 2:**
Crossroads of Identity and Resistance . . . . . 5

**Chapter 3:**
Bluelight, Harm Reduction, and the Search for Something Better . . . . . 13

**Chapter 4:**
Westbound, Trading Atlantic Tides for Pacific Climates . . . . . 21

**Chapter 5:**
Across the Planet, Australia, Curiosity, and the Spirit of Discovery . . . . . 29

**Chapter 6:**
South Pacific Sleepover, Half-Year in the Villages of Fiji . . . . . 37

**Chapter 7:**
A Journey of Restlessness and First Timer in Asia . . . . . 45

**Chapter 8:**
A Year-Long Pilgrimage in India, A Reality Check. . . . . 55

**Chapter 9:**
Thailand to Portland . . . . . 63

**Chapter 10:**
A Fractured Working Holiday, New Zealand . . . . . 73

**Chapter 11:**
Navigating Worlds, Constant Culture Shock and Reverse . . . . 83

**Chapter 12:**
Digital Frontiers, Gone Wild and Trees, Cultivating Counterculture Communities . . . . . 91

**Chapter 13:**
Digital Media Empire and the Birth of my First Daughter . . . 99

**Chapter 14:**
Sakura in a Sea of Sorrows (PTSD) . . . . . 111

**Chapter 15:**
Reflection . . . . . 119

**Chapter 16:**
The Shape of Belonging with Couch Surfing . . . . . 127

**Chapter 17:**
Digital Roots of Belonging . . . . . 135

**Chapter 18:**
Pandemic Road. . . . . 143

**Chapter 19:**
Through the Lens of Pain, A Medical Trial. . . . . 151

**Chapter 20:**
Crohn's Disease and the Unseen Battles Within. . . . . 159

**Chapter 21:**
The Theft of My Father, Cautionary Tale of Elder Abuse . . . 167

**Chapter 22:**
Fractured Light, The Retinal Detachment Saga . . . . . 173

**Chapter 23:**
Poetry in the Wake of Pain. . . . . 179

Every loss reveals hidden grace

1

# A Child Showered With Scorn

Hope returns after endless night
YOU'RE SPECIAL

# Chapter 1

# A Child Showered With Scorn

Picture a tidy neighborhood, the kind with trimmed lawns and neighbors who wave just enough. Inside our house it was different. My mother, a respected elementary-school teacher in public, moved at home between glacial silence and sudden storms. I learned to forecast her weather by the sound of heels in the hall. Accusations, insults, humiliations, chisels carving at whatever self I was trying to grow.

From early childhood I became the primary outlet for her emotions. Praise was conditional, affection transactional, and the rules unreadable until I had already broken them. If I protested, I was told I'd misunderstood. If I remembered too well, I was told I was imagining things. Reality became negotiable, except with her.

When words ran out, punishment turned architectural. My bedroom became a holding cell for hours,

sometimes days. The door didn't lock, but it may as well have. Isolation wasn't discipline; it was erasure. I learned to survive by vanishing, cleaning twice, speaking softly, avoiding anything that looked like joy.

These habits set the trajectory of my inner life. I became the child who made himself small, who stayed out of the frame, who tried never to be the reason a storm started. And when the storm came anyway, I learned to carry the blame quietly, as if my silence could save the house.

School should have been an escape, but fear travels light and follows you everywhere. I mapped routes through hallways to avoid attention. I edited myself out of friendships before they had a chance. When other kids learned sports, parties, and travel with friends, I learned advanced survival:

- Forecast the mood. One wrong word can launch a storm.
- Clean everything twice. A gleaming counter might buy ten minutes of peace.
- Disappear. Passion projects, writing, music, basketball, went into a mental attic labeled DO NOT TOUCH.

As adolescence approached, control tightened. My mother preferred me smoothed down and silent, a

mirror she could polish for the image she wanted others to see. I was not a person to be known, but an accessory to her public life: useful when compliant, a problem when real.

Eventually the pressure had to discharge. One day my fist met drywall. I didn't hurt anyone; I needed the house to hear me. The police arrived. They listened to her. They did not ask what had led here, or what the house sounded like on other nights. When they left, I understood something I wish no child had to learn: an institution can fail the person who needs it most.

Matt McKean/Star-Banner

issing Pals
Petting Zoo

Shawn Apple, a 2-year-old Ocala youth, receives a special kiss from a friend on St. Valentine's Day, during a visit to Old MacDonald's Farm at the Southeastern Youth Fair. In background is Stacey Raez, 11, from Dunnellon. The fair, being held at the livestock pavilion at 2232 N.E. Jacksonville Road, includes the children's petting zoo, open from 2-8 p.m. daily through Friday. For more on youth fair, see story and pictures, Pg. 2B.

That night redrew a map inside me. Authority might not protect you. The benefit of the doubt does not distribute evenly. Children can be tidy and terrified at the same time, and people will praise the tidy.

Maybe you're nodding because you've lived some version of this, the family that looked fine from the curb, the door that made a quiet sound when it closed, the hours you edited yourself smaller. If so, I'm writing to the echo behind your door to say you were not alone.

Why did no one listen? Why was suffering invisible when it was the weather of our house? I still don't have perfect answers. I do have consequences. I grew into someone who notices power, who distrusts easy narratives, who keeps receipts and asks questions until the story makes sense. I became the person who believes survivors first and then does the work to verify, because I needed someone to do that for me.

This first chapter is not only a record of abuse. It is a field guide for what neglect can do to a child, and for the stubborn ways a child resists anyway. I am still learning how to unlearn. I am still looking for a home that is good enough, and figuring out how to build one from the inside out.



Contents

# Crossroads of Identity and Resistance

## Redefining family through experience

# 2

## Healing begins in quiet places

# Chapter 2

# Crossroads of Identity and Resistance

My childhood started off as a kid of Jewish ancestry in a home turned Southern Baptist, living in the suburban "white side" of town. Ocala's geographic and social divisions, literally and symbolically defined by train tracks, separated its white communities from its predominantly black neighborhoods. Growing up in the 1990s, these lines were neither faint lines nor metaphorical; they structured the rhythms of daily life and constrained the contours of opportunity and belonging.

After the police removed me from my abusive home, the state had no foster bed ready. So I spent a short stretch in a psychiatric ward. It was sterile, lonely, and strangely familiar. Until two days later when one of my best friends from high school was dropped there battling anorexia. We passed time talking about music, sharing songs to drown out the echoing halls,

and we shared brief yet meaningful solace through conversation. Another girl I knew from high school arrived too, the same girl I'd once helped through a suicide crisis. Seeing them reminded me that pain can look different on everyone but still feel the same. These coincidences, though surreal, served as stabilizing social anchors amid a profound rupture in my sense of continuity.

When a foster spot opened, it was across those train tracks, in the black neighborhood I'd only driven past. Dirt roads, modest houses, not far from high crime areas. I'd soon be the lone white face. Even from a young age, race had always seemed completely overhyped to me, people everywhere are people, shaped and defined by various cultures, especially the one they are born into and persist through. My parents' behind-doors racism did have a rebellious impact on me. I felt pain with every racist comment that both my mom or dad would utter. Comments that weren't fair or based on reason, but rather simple-minded prejudices and unfunny stereotypes. Stereotypes can be funny sometimes but neither of my parents told funny jokes.

Dirt roads and modest homes replaced the suburban neighborhood I had known. Yet amid the initial dissonance, I was compelled to reevaluate my assumptions and reconfigure my identity in relation to others whose life experiences had been shaped by different,

often more acute, forms of structural abuse and marginalization. Everything here, the slang, the music, even the way dinner was served, asked me to listen first and talk later.

Adaptation was not optional; it was imperative. The other foster children had endured circumstances that, in many cases, surpassed my own in their severity. Their presence constituted an informal education in lived resilience, one that was neither theoretical nor abstract. Through shared meals, stories, and quiet moments of mutual recognition, we began to cultivate trust. That trust was fragile, unevenly distributed, and hard-won, but it constituted a collective assertion of dignity in a world that had often denied us such acknowledgment.

Just a few blocks away, a couple old friends from high school hung out in what everyone called the "drug house," a place heavy with the smell of weed and leftover pizza. I never smoked (saving that for later), but I'd swing by to feed their pets, grab groceries, and occasionally trip-sit when they were tripping on LSD or mushrooms. Those visits blurred the line between chaos and comfort, proof that good and bad sometimes share the same living room.

The African-American woman who was my foster mother, whom I would call "mama", offered a form of care that was far from idealized, yet meaningfully dis-

tinct from the emotional desolation I had previously endured. Her household was occasionally chaotic, shaped by transient relationships and economic precarity, but there was food on the table, relative freedom of expression, and a tacit acknowledgment of my humanity. She supported my efforts to complete high school, allowing me the autonomy to drive myself to class and maintain a part-time job at a flea market. I had been doing small jobs for money since I was 8. Pull weeds or babysit for neighbors. I was forced to become independent at a young age. In retrospect, I was racing toward independence to "grow up," but I still longed for some kind of relative dependency on someone who could care about me.

Living in foster care taught me to read a room a little bit, to honor stories that weren't mine, to be humble. Family stopped meaning biology; it became whoever shared the struggle and the laughter that day. Henry, one of the foster kids, used to crack me up with how he danced to my alternative rock music. Home wasn't an address, it was a moment when I felt seen and safe, even if only for an hour. The normative definitions of "family," "home," and "belonging" were dismantled and reconstructed not ideologically, but through practicality and shared experience.

Looking back, that season didn't just move me from one house to another; it rewired how I see the world and myself. Ultimately, this chapter signified more

than a brief transitional period. It marked the emergence of a new epistemology of the self, one predicated on relational awareness, adaptive identity, and a sharpened critique of the systems that had failed me.

Healing, I learned, isn't a straight line. It starts in messy places, in mismatched kitchens, on sagging couches, beside people who are also piecing themselves together. That's where I first felt the fragile spark of agency in spaces marked by contradiction and complexity. It was in an unexpected home, amid unfamiliar faces and fragmented routines.

# Contents

# Bluelight, Harm Reduction, & Search for Something Better

Scars tell stories

Storms pass, strength remains within

Light breaks through silent pain

# Chapter 3

# Bluelight, Harm Reduction, and the Search for Something Better

At seventeen, right after finishing high school, I moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, a city known for its mix of beach culture, college crowds, a kind of gritty undercurrent that felt oddly honest; along with unpredictable energy. It wasn't exactly a clean break from my past, but it gave me space to start redefining myself. The beach became a symbol of freedom and calm, helping me create some distance from earlier emotional struggles and years of longing.

I got a job at a fancy restaurant in a 5-star resort. One weekend, a lesbian couple I worked with invited me to their home to drop MDMA. Music felt good, lights flashed, and someone handed me MDMA. For the first time, my heart felt unzipped, in a good way. I hugged people I'd just met, confessed fears I'd never voiced,

and believed, if only for a night, that I belonged on the planet. MDMA gave me the most incredible feelings. Such a tool for trauma.

Not long after that experience, I came across a website that specialized in MDMA and harm reduction, and that website would become incredibly influential in my life: Bluelight. Bluelight is the world's largest online forum dedicated to harm reduction and human connection to drug use. Instead of "Just Say No," it is accepted that there are valid reasons to say yes. I spent days and weeks after work reading posts on Bluelight from public libraries. Then I joined in on Bluelight, typing out every shimmer of my MDMA afterglow, and cracking jokes, while also hungry to understand the meaning and neurochemistry behind that positive life-changing experience.

I lurked on Bluelight at first, soaking up posts about MDMA purity tests, GHB dosing math, and valuable life saving info. One name popped up again and again: PhreeX, real name Dave. He'd tried more chemicals than I could pronounce, but he approached each one like a nerdy scientist. We started messaging daily. Dave broke down receptor sites and half-lives in a way that made me feel smart, not small. Somewhere in those chats, he and I pitched an idea to the site admins: A new subforum called "Other Drugs." It would cover everything that didn't fit the main categories, GHB, Ketamine, DXM, research chemicals. They

said yes! Watching Other Drugs filled with questions and thought out answers gave me a sense of purpose I hadn't felt before.

The onscreen friendships would soon become face-to-face. They eventually called themselves the Blue-light Central Florida Crew: Most of these people were professional workers like nurses, teachers, engineers, even lawyers, each of us bruised in our own way, all of us searching for connection. We swapped reagent kits like trading cards, argued about safe stacks, and swore no one would ever be left tripping alone on a bathroom floor. GHB, MDMA, Nitrous Oxide, those were staples. We joked about "crackheads" for the balloon warriors who loved nitrous a little too much, which we all did, but beneath the laughs was a steady rhythm of care.

At 19, I was probably the youngest of the Central Florida Crew, usually the most shy, and still shaky from past trauma, yet they folded me in without hesitation. Ruru, RaverDad, BrownMan. People drove hours to make sure I had a ride to a party. DJ Icey at a club one night and Rabbit In The Moon the next weekend. Their simple kindness, Hey, you good? Need water? , put stitches in holes I thought were permanent. Why did they bother doing this for me?

Of course, every high-energy story has shadows. People occasionally overdid doses; bad trips happened.

But instead of shame, we offered pillows, quiet rooms, and "tell me what you're feeling." Harm reduction wasn't just about substances, it was about standing guard over each other's vulnerability. Experiences that were overwhelmingly positive with very few bad ones. This is the power of harm reduction, friendship, and knowledge.

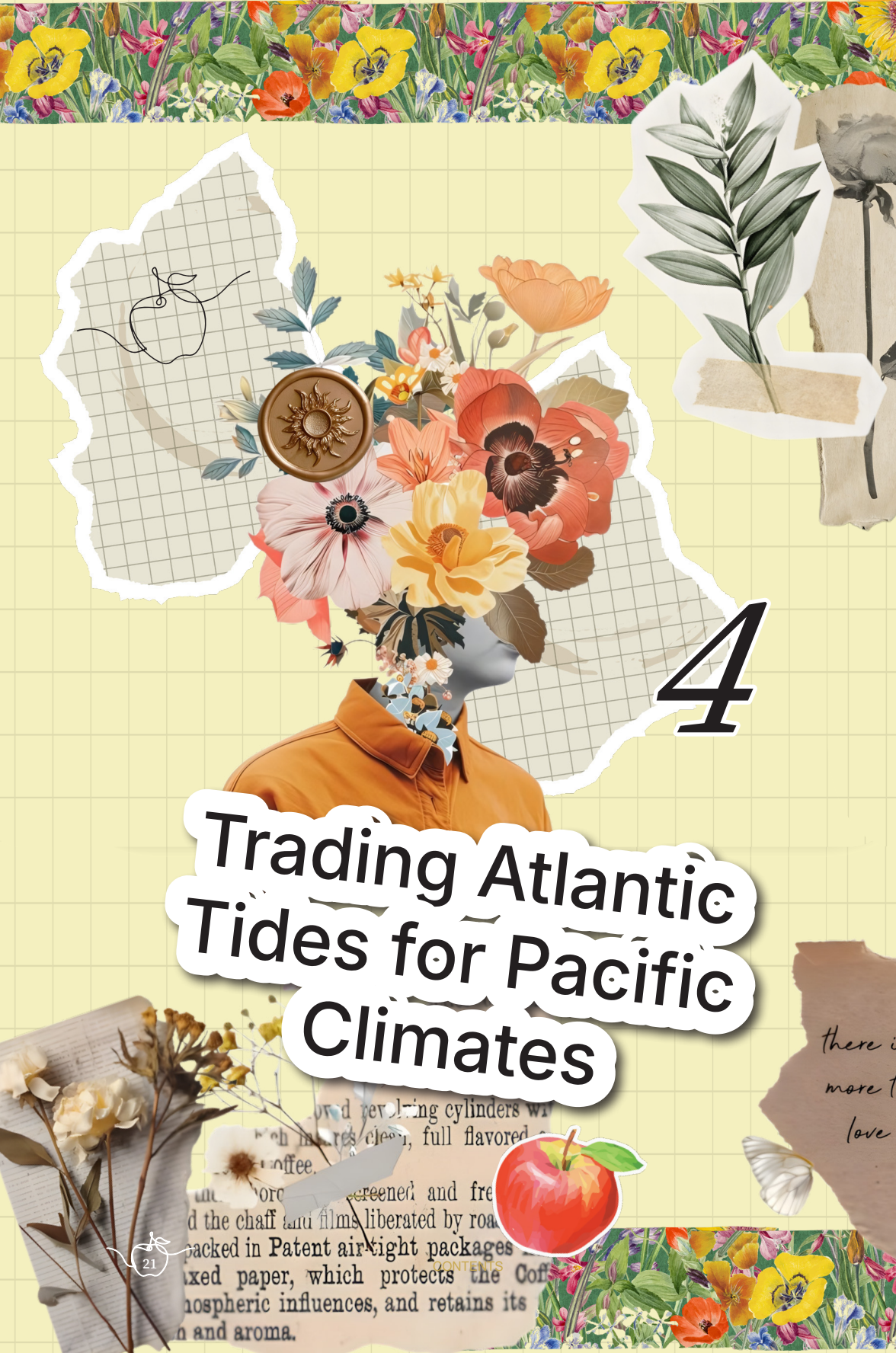
One memory glows brightest: A Bluelighter friend from New Jersey, someone I'd only known through late-night chats, literally drove all the way from New Jersey to Daytona Beach, Florida just to drive north together to go to a rave headlined by Sasha and John Digweed. This was a mega regional Bluelight meetup that had Bluelight mini celebrities from all over the east coast.

Sasha and John Digweed were two of my favorite DJs and the event was purely magical for me. Knowing that I had the highest quality MDMA, that had been properly tested and vetted for, made all of the difference. Why doesn't everyone deserve a guarantee for this kind of safety for their substance of choice? It was like a 5-hour full body orgasm, this along with light shows, "blowing up" people, and some of the most incredible music of that generation. After the rave, there was an epic Bluelight afterparty where almost everyone came together.

Bluelight was never just a website. It was a home. A space where people like me, who had often felt lost, judged, or misunderstood, could be honest, could learn, and could grow. For many of us, it was the first place where our experiences weren't shamed but respected. It helped me understand that drug use, like any human behavior, exists within a context. And that context includes curiosity, healing, trauma, and the search for meaning. And it convinced me that community can form in the most unexpected places and spill over into real-world hugs, carpools, and shared sunrise drives. Imagine a better world where we could have it.

This chapter of my life was full of intense learning, self-discovery, and deep connection (especially with a lift via MDMA). It shaped how I think about community, consciousness, and what it means to care for others. Through Bluelight, I found not just a digital forum, but a real-world tribe, one that taught me how to heal, how to question, and how to imagine better ways of being together and trying to live in this world.

Contents



# 4

# Trading Atlantic Tides for Pacific Climates

# Peace found in fragments

# Peace born from constant change

*The ones that love us, never leave us.*

# Chapter 4

# Westbound, Trading Atlantic Tides for Pacific Climates

Back in Daytona Beach, I spent many nights after work volunteering behind a screen. I co-created and moderated the Other Drugs forum on Bluelight and eventually became a site-wide administrator. This was a significant responsibility, especially for someone like me, introverted and still dealing with unresolved trauma. Despite my personal struggles, I found myself helping others navigate complex experiences with substances, sharing knowledge and offering support in meaningful ways.

Online friendships soon stretched past Florida's humidity. I became close online buddies with several Bluelighters from southern California. One Bluelighter in Santa Monica, California kept repeating something like, "Come visit. Start fresh." Her words were like a lifeline which helped me to cling to the notion that there was some other. With more hope than planning,

I quit my job, threw everything into a backpack, and booked a cross country flight to Los Angeles.

My final Daytona sunrise was pure postcard, peach sky, warm tide. On my last morning in Daytona Beach, I took a long, solitary walk along the shore, trying to say goodbye to a place that had been both a comfort and in some ways a cage. I walked until the waves erased every footprint, trying to believe the ocean's quiet promise: You're allowed to begin again. Time slipped away, and I ended up racing home just in time to catch my taxi to MCO. The rush of that morning echoed the emotional turbulence I felt, leaving behind familiarity in pursuit of possibility, but also this wild belief that different scenery could mean a different ending.

When I landed at LAX, that Santa Monica online person met me at the airport and brought me to her tiny studio apartment blocks from the Santa Monica Pier. I slept on a mattress at the foot of her bed, an awkward yet generous gesture that introduced me to the kind of trust and hospitality that would define much of my near future. This spontaneous generosity shaped my understanding of community and laid the foundation for my years of couch surfing to come.

Though I had physically left Florida, I brought my anxiety and social struggles with me. I was still quiet and unsure of myself, but gradually, I formed connections

with more Bluelighters in southern California. One of them, a Bluelighter originally from Australia, was super cool and he asked if I wanted to share a house that he was planning to rent in the Valley. I said sure why not. That house eventually became the center of the second (first?) most famous Bluelight crew that would be known as the Bluelight SoCal Crew. You had the Central Florida Crew and the SoCal Crew, the two biggest and infamous real life factions of Bluelight, and I stumbled into both quite by accident and / or maybe by fate?

Our gatherings blurred lines between party and workshop. Test kits sat next to bowls of fruit; playlists flowed from ambient to house; someone always watched that everyone had water.

Ketamine felt like walking through quiet hallways inside my own mind. I met memories I'd buried and questions I'd never asked.

MDMA was still daylight in capsule or tablet form, warmth that unlocked every bolted door in my chest. I could speak honestly, hug without flinching, and believe for a few hours that I truly belonged. Always used with methods to minimize risk.

LSD was more complicated. My first trip, of all places, Disneyland, magnified colors but also my anxiety. Later LSD trips shined a floodlight on undiagnosed

ADHD / PTSD. Acid didn't create those cracks; it simply showed me where they were. On the other hand, Candyflipping (MDMA first then LSD) provided great experiences.

***Too many other substances to list here.***

On weekends we sometimes went to mind-blowing warehouse raves in downtown Los Angeles. Bass thumped like a shared heartbeat; lasers painted temporary galaxies overhead. Under those lights I learned a new kind of prayer: Eyes closed, feet moving, gratitude washing through me. Awakening afterparties at my house formed deep connections with people.

### *Harm Reduction, Hearts First*

Bluelight duties spilled offline through DanceSafe. We handed out earplugs, reagent kits, and steady reassurance. The more facts we shared, the fewer emergencies we saw. Purpose felt real, tangible in each test strip turned straight to black and told someone their pill was safer.

Around this time I tried methamphetamine. Stigma says one thing, but my undiagnosed ADHD felt something else: Clarity, stillness, focus. For eight months I used meth in various doses, landed a full time IT job, and functioned better than I ever had before. We had some of the strongest "stuff" in California, the slang of

which was glass. Huge translucent shards that always tested well and felt perfect. I found Rohypnol aka the "date rape drug," a type of benzodiazepine, to be particularly helpful for comedowns from intense sporadic meth usage during this chapter. During this time I had access to any drugs I could possibly ever want or need. All drug use during this period was typically rooted in the same harm-reduction mindset: Minimize risk, maximize care. How it should be. When I chose to stop meth, withdrawal in my case, was three lethargic days and a dull headache, just a quiet transition. I realize some people are not as lucky, as some do struggle with addiction, whereas I generally never have. It would be good if there were more studies to understand why this is.

Southern California wasn't perfect, like it never rained enough, and I wasn't used to smog; but it was pivotal. Trying Thai inspired food for the first time seems like a joke now. SoCal was a time of growth, of self-discovery, and of learning what it felt like to be an adult and to belong. Some moments were difficult, but many others were incredible. I began to see healing not as a destination, but as a process, messy, nonlinear, but always possible with the right support. I learned that belonging starts the moment someone says, "Stay as long as you need."

I left Daytona chasing a fresh start. In California I found something sturdier: The practice of starting

over, again and again, with people who prove that even the messiest stories can be held, gently and together. Through all the ups and downs, it helped me begin the journey of becoming a more stable, more complete, more thoughtful, and more hopeful version of myself.

Contents

5
Across the Planet-
The Spirit of
Discovery
29
CONTENTS

Light clings to every step

# Chapter 5

# Across the Planet, Australia, Curiosity, and the Spirit of Discovery

Los Angeles had already shown me how a single address could rewrite the script of a life. I was living in a big, sun-soaked house with a backyard pool, seemingly a world away from Florida's police state with extra paperwork and ultra religious conservatism, sharing the space with an Australian roommate I'd met through Bluelight. Some nights we hung out by the pool while the lights shimmered like a quiet galaxy. I'd imagine gum-trees, outback highways, and Melbourne's bohemian streets painted wall-to-wall with art and trams parading through. Each vision landed like an invite: Can you make it here?

That spark of curiosity felt urgent. I was working an IT office job while the country was still raw from September 11 2001; myself, and everyone around me carried a subtle, restless grief. The thought of traveling

somewhere completely new felt terrifying, but it also felt necessary. When I learned about Australia's Working Holiday Visa scheme, twelve whole months to live and work there, I took a few weeks to read more about it, and then applied and was granted the visa.

### *Trading Poolside Dreams for New Horizons*

The plane ticket came with a free stopover, and the name itself, Fiji, sounded like possibility. I planned on seven quiet vacation days and ended up watching them reshape my idea of beauty: beaches blindingly white, water clear enough to reflect tomorrow, locals who greeted strangers with free-flowing bulas (hellos and good wishes). I slept in no-frill guesthouses, took a rattling seaplane to tiny islands, and promised myself I'd return. Then the 7-day holiday was over.

### *First Steps in Melbourne, Australia*

Australia began with another Bluelight lifeline: A Singaporean friend handed me keys to his CBD Melbourne rental house. The city felt alive in thousands of small ways, tram bells, the botanic gardens nearby the house, murals dripping color in hidden alleys. I rode those trams for hours just to feel the rhythm of a place that balanced bookstore hush with festival roar. Within days I was sitting in a Chinese restaurant thinking, if cities can be soulmates, I've just met mine.

### *Finding Friends Down Under*

The Aussie Bluelight Crew, perhaps the third largest and infamous one, welcomed me like they'd been saving a seat. I made Bluelight friends in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, and eventually Perth. As a side note: One member in Melbourne, johnboy, would later buy Bluelight. Anyways, this was my first time outside of my home country and I was pretty naive in general. Though I was quite open to learning more about Australian life. I was treated incredibly well for being a major introvert and totally out of the loop on most things Australian.

### *Across the Desert in a Humvee*

I also found a group of non-Bluelight friends in Melbourne, and they were talking about doing a cross-Australian odyssey. So I said yeah I'll go too. We headed from Melourne to Perth via the tip of South Australia in a hulking Humvee. We made it across the Nullarbor Plain, with a horizon so wide it made even big worries look tiny. Daylight painted the land in rust and gold; nightfall unveiled constellations I'd never seen, evidence that darkness can still be generous.

### *Perth's Slow Pulse*

Perth at that time felt unhurried. I stitched together nature paradises in the arvo and evening time for conversations. A friendly couple, who I knew there once

again via Bluelight, opened a spare room for me near downtown Perth. I was generally sober during my time in Australia which was me simply trying something different since the trip itself to Fiji and Australia was intense and exciting enough as it were. I still had the afterglow of Fiji in my bones. Perth's kindness echoed what I'd felt in Melbourne yet carried a laid-back accent all its own. I learned that one country can hold multitudes: Coastlines that sprint, coastlines that breathe.

### *The Long Trip Back to Melbourne*

I took the train east, letting the clack of rails synchronize my thoughts. Every window framed another reminder that distance is measured in ideas as much as miles. I realized I'd spent the better part of a year letting hospitality replace paychecks and conversations replace itineraries. A favorable exchange rate, $1 American dollar for roughly $2. 50 Aussie, helped heaps, but couches, spare mattresses, and inexpensive Chinese-Aussie meals were the real currency.

### *What Seven Months Taught Me*

I didn't chase a career in Australia; I chased understanding, of cultures, of landscapes, of myself. Bluelight had shown me the power of informed care; traveling showed me the power of curious hearts. Learning to take the piss out of myself a little helped

me see past my ego. I left with new friendships, an expanded map of what home can feel like, and the conviction that the unknown is less threatening when you walk into it with open arms.

Next came a promise kept: Back to Fiji, this time not as a layover, but as a place offering to generously share its deeper rhythms for me to learn about. Curiosity had carried me halfway around the world; now curiosity was about to introduce new life experience, in my next chapter.

Contents

# Half-Year in the Villages of Fiji

# 6

Fiii memories pulled me back

Kindness came in tidal waves

# Chapter 6

# South Pacific Sleepover, Half-Year in the Villages of Fiji

I didn't come back to Fiji because of some grand plan. I came back because every time I tried to think about anything else, the memory of Fiji punched through hard, like Mike Tyson's Punch-Out. Two things not having anything to do with each other so a contradiction like me.

One casual stopover in Fiji had gobbled up my dreams and had gotten stuck in my soul. Fiji felt like a non-substance induced euphoria. It was my brain's natural chemistry getting me high during the first visit. Like a catheter filled with South Pacific bliss. More powerful than the fears of possibly being jobless, desolate, and lost far from any home. I stepped off the plane back onto Fiji's main island carrying nothing but a backpack and the desperate hope that the unknown would be kinder than the misfortune and unfortunate childhood I was trying to outrun.

From a distance, Fiji is all brochure gloss, turquoise shallows, sand white enough to blind you, jungles screaming green. Up close, it's more down-to-Earth. The villages breathed generosity the way lungs breathe air. Doors gaped wide. Strangers offered food before they learned your full name. I'd grown up counting crumbs of affection; here, kindness came in tidal waves that knocked the wind from my chest. I needed familial love like a dog laps water with its tongue.

What I didn't fully anticipate, however, was the powerful role Christianity played in many Fijian villages. At the time, I strongly identified as an atheist and considered it part of my personal mission to challenge religious beliefs I viewed as relics of colonial influence. I didn't realize at the time that culture controls most aspects of human society, and culture is a formidable foe in a David vs Goliath situation. There is nothing more stubborn than entrenched culture in the face of opposing knowledge. On nights of dark skies, I tried to explain in astronomy terms that those lights were planets, other Suns, and galaxies; some so far away that most human minds could barely grasp. The universe is so big, how does it make sense that there is a supernatural creature watching, following, and controlling everything we do on this planet? Why do religious rules make sense, and why are the rules considered holy, when the rules were created by less

sophisticated humans a long time ago predating most types of science?

### *One Invitation, Then Another*

I ferried north from the main island, Viti Levu, to the second largest island, Vanua Levu. A man chatted me up across the deck rail; by the time we docked, he'd promised me a mat in his family's bure. That single gesture multiplied. Over the course of the next few months, I hopscotched from village to village, immersing myself in daily life, participating in local customs, and slowly shedding layers of the cultural lens I had brought with me. Each new stop exposing me to communal living while stripping another husk of Western hurry from my shell.

Village life was unlike anything I had experienced. Close family and home cooked meals from scratch. Multiple generations under one roof. I walked barefoot, shared clothing when needed, and slept on simple mats in communal huts. Learned the peace of falling asleep beneath thatch while the sky peered in through tiny gaps. Upon awakening, I joined the women to help prepare breakfast. Each evening, I joined the men for kava ceremonies, a blend of tradition, storytelling, and quiet reflection. These gatherings weren't just about drinking kava; they were about bonding, reinforcing values, and creating a shared sense of time and space. Kava is a wonderful natu-

ral drug and medicine that helped shape a culture. I offered help where I could; I hauled fishing nets, collected vegetables, lugged water, but mostly I just listened, observed, and absorbed, letting the island's heartbeat drown out my own noise. For the first time in my life eating fresh foods instead of Burger King or westernized Chinese.

Night after night we circled the kava bowl, passing the shell, tongues tingling, stories drifting skyward with the smoke. The pauses between words felt cathedral-deep, roomy enough to cradle grief and laughter in the same breath.

### *Illness, Loss, and Fiercer Kindness*

Fiji wasn't a silk cradle. Coral cuts flared into infections. Foot fungus from walking barefoot and sharing sandals began to take deep root under my toenails. Sunburn seared like hot coals. One reckless plate of curry ignited violent food poisoning. Then a mosquito's kiss delivered Dengue Fever that stapled me to a woven mat, delirious, trembling, bargaining with shadows. Each dawn neighbors padded in with coconut water, papaya, and jokes soft as lullabies. They showed survival was a group project; their tenderness left me aching in places I didn't know existed.

On Taveuni, the Garden Island, I met a young woman whose laugh felt like sunrise after weeks of rain. For

a few weeks, I let myself believe in soulmates. Then her cousin discovered my scorched-earth stance on religion. His rage exploded; a shove from him caused me to trip over a wooden panel on the ground behind me. A flash of pain and the sudden taste of iron. It was a wake-up call, that cultural misunderstandings can have serious consequences. I had failed to recognize that my criticisms, however reasoned they may have seemed to me, were experienced as deeply offensive by people whose faith formed the core of their identity. Perhaps religion shouldn't be laden to the core of identity, and instead more moderate versions should be encouraged to be propagated and handed down to future generations?

During my over five months in Fiji, almost all of my cameras vanished. I had multiple disposable cameras and my first digital camera. Ripped away from me was almost every photographic memory that I had taken over those months. All I had left were the scanned photos that I still had from my first visit. Without images, I had to trust my own pulse that the grace I'd experienced was real, and not some fever dream.

### *What Fiji Branded on My Bones*

I left Fiji lighter in body, heavier in outlook and scope. Fiji didn't hand me tidy epiphanies; it tattooed raw questions onto my ribs: What if home is something you feel, not something you own? What if love is a

muscle that grows each time you use it? What if listening, truly listening, is the bravest form of resistance? I didn't walk away with easy answers, but I gained something far more valuable: A more compassionate and humble way of seeing the world.

Even now and then, I taste cool kava on my tongue, hear the ocean sucking at the reef, feel the phantom weight of borrowed blankets. Fiji didn't erase my scars, but it rewrote some tracks on their soundtrack; from survivor clinging to cliffs to wanderer welcomed at almost every doorway, from shouting over divides to learning to speak softly while trying to exchange knowledge.

My gratitude is as deep and relentless as the Pacific itself. And it's still rising.

Even now and then, I taste cool kava on my tongue, hear the ocean sucking at the reef, feel the phantom weight of borrowed blankets. Fiji didn't erase my scars, but it rewrote some tracks on their soundtrack; from survivor clinging to cliffs to wanderer welcomed at almost every doorway, from shouting over divides to learning to speak softly while trying to exchange knowledge.

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Contents

# A Journey of Restlessness

can i go where you go?

CONTENTS

Ghosts surfaced quietly

7

Love weathered every storm

ed line
t, she goes
into editing,
he way I do as
ion and film,
here moments

ave ambitions to
ry fiction? "None.
bly. And the more I
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by Philip Roth for the first time), the
more I'm exposed to all these great
oices and writers, and I couldn't begin
know how writers do they
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# Chapter 7

# A Journey of Restlessness and First Timer in Asia

Leaving Fiji felt like peeling myself away from a pulse I'd just learned to recognize. After spending six deeply transformative months immersed amongst small Fijian villages, and nearly a year in Australia, I returned to the United States and briefly resettled in Los Angeles. There, I stayed with an old friend from the Bluelight community, which offered a sense of familiarity and temporary grounding. Still, the fast-paced and structured nature of American life felt discordant after the deeply communal and unhurried rhythm of Fiji. I realized that my inner world had shifted, my values, my priorities, and even my understanding of home had all evolved.

I was tired of L. A. I hated the fakeness, the costs, the endlessly dry weather, and the busy highways. I began traveling up the West Coast, visiting towns, and

cities like San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, each city offering its own flavor of culture and personality. Portland exuded a progressive ethos and community-minded spirit that resonated with my evolving values. Seattle, with its moody skies and introspective ambiance, seemed to reflect my internal state. On Vancouver Island, in the small coastal town of Nanaimo, I fell in love with a Canadian woman with a young half-Korean son. She was pretty nice. I ended up spending nearly six months in Nanaimo. A step-father type role in the western world was new for me. I grew up without close immediate or extended family, and I was also without any siblings or cousins to learn from. I got a glimpse of the responsibilities of helping a child with school, educating a child, and keeping them entertained. We did sports, cooking, and quiet nights of homework. We went on island-wide road trips, including hiking amongst the red cedar trees and splashing in tidal pools. When growing up neither of my parents took me to nature. West coast people seem to love nature, and I could begin to see why. I regret that we never did the big trek to the extremely tall hidden waterfall in the center of the island. I felt a fleeting close sense of a nuclear family home in the Americas as close as I'd ever felt.

### *Patchwork Survival in Seattle and San Francisco*

Back in Seattle right before my Canadian visa-free stay ended, I lived by cobbling, house-sitting, baby-sitting,

pet-sitting, any gig that let me stay in a place for a while. Eventually, my spirit led me back to the path of San Francisco, a city whose vibrancy and eccentricity was like no other city I had ever known. I spent the first month staying in the Casto district with a New Zealand guy I found on a web site called, Hospitality Club. We'd talk until 3 AM about metaphysics and travel, trying to measure the soul in conversation. He took me to restaurants to eat fresh seafood. Over one meal, he said, "You've got a really gentle spirit, you smile heaps, and I think you'd really love Thailand." He described the Thai people as gentle and emotionally intuitive. That comment struck a chord. I certainly would keep that recommendation for Thailand recorded for easy recall.

I lucked into finding a San Francisco housing situation through Craigslist: A retired lawyer offered me a modest space in his garage turned bedroom which became my landing pad. His house was between the Fillmore and Civic Center neighborhoods in the city center. It wasn't glamorous, but it was safe. He let me use his computer, and I hustled: Cleaning houses, walking dogs, odd jobs strung together like mismatched beads. I had so many magical experiences in San Francisco; from Pride to anti-war protests to random block parties. However, I easily decided after a great number of months in San Francisco to book a flight to Thailand.

### *First Steps into Southeast Asia*

Early 2000s Thailand hadn't yet fully bent beneath mass tourism; mystery still clung to its corners. I looped the kingdom in circles, Bangkok's neon fever, Chiang Mai's relative hush, beaches in the south where the water glowed like melted sapphire. Around in circles across southeast Asia. Each passport stamp from visa runs felt less like entry to a country and more like an X-ray of my own unfinished self, I suppose. I encountered expats, locals, and fellow wanderers, each one adding to the mosaic of an experience.

### *Laos: Opium Smoke and Daylight by the Stream*

Borders blurred. I drifted into Laos, north, toward the Chinese edge, ending up in a mountain village where I was quietly invited into an opium den. Smoke curled, time slowed, and memories I'd buried under years of motion rose like ghosts before dissipating.

Later, I was on a bus that sputtered to its death a few hours outside Luang Prabang in the middle of nowhere. Instead of waiting for the next bus, even though I was the only foreigner, something made me want to stay in that tiny village. There was a very simple guesthouse in the village that was renting rooms. I was the only customer for my entire stay.

I met a young woman in the village while walking down by the river to view the daylight. We spoke no shared language, yet something warm and immediate flickered between us. She invited me to visit her and her family almost daily. Sitting cross-legged in their hut we shared sticky rice and a bit too spicy home-made papaya salad. A couple weeks later, Laotian police summoned me to interrogate me via a translator as to what I was doing staying in the village. It was not normal back then. I was nervous but tried my best to give a simple and honest explanation: The bus broke down and the girl. Being an old school Communist country and through word-of-mouth, they were already aware. Shortly after that I randomly met the governor of the province and he invited me to his house for a live music party full of all types of home-made spirits, and exotic meats such as barbecue dogs and rats. The next day was the worst hangover imaginable as I was vomiting up the night before. I spent the rest of my time volunteering nearby with a French NGO which was providing medical services to villagers.

### *A Rescue That Became an Escape*

Back in Thailand fate tangled me with another woman, we were around the same age and she seemed fairly caring. Her story was complex. She lived under the strict control of her father, and it seemed she needed

help in escaping her father's rule. Her desperation was palpable.

Twenty-something and hungry for heroism, I believed I could save her. But her father held a grip of influences with his personal contacts inside the Thai military. I was staying in Chiang Mai, and she came up from Bangkok to be with me. We were simply walking around Chiang Mai the day after she arrived, when the police in Chiang Mai stopped us, told us to get in their truck, and drove us off to the local police station. The police proceeded to threaten to hold me at the station indefinitely, no charges, just intimidation and warning glances. They said the girl's father had called them and asked for a favor. Her dad was driving from Bangkok to fetch her. We waited at the police station for half a day. The girl left with her father and the police told me to get lost.

Instead of forgetting about her, I stupidly plotted with youthful ignorance. I kept in online communication with this girl. She persuaded me to travel back to Bangkok a while later. With a Thai lawyer's advice and a decoy car, it was arranged for me and the girl to meet like characters in a Hollywood thriller, where we would evade her family, get married, and then elope to India. An insane plan that made no sense except for inside the mind of a lovesick teenager who had seen Romeo and Juliet more than a few times. Neither of us had been to India before. What was the long-term

plan? I thought I was in love and I wanted to help someone I cared for.

For a feverish stretch, we lived on adrenaline and borrowed dreams, convinced love could out-run everything. The dream began to fray under the weight of cultural differences, emotional intensity, and logistical hurdles. We had run not just toward love, but away from unresolved pain hurtling toward consequences of following a romantic ideal to its furthest edge.

Contents

# 8

# Pilgrimage in India

Temples questioned what I knew

Trust built

# Chapter 8

# A Year-Long Pilgrimage in India, A Reality Check

The year was 2004. Our daring escape from Thailand to India felt like leaping off the edge of one life and free-falling into another. I told myself we were rescuing my wife from her father's iron grip; truthfully, I was also clawing for my own release party, from foster-care ghosts, from childhood fists, from the tremor of never quite belonging anywhere. India, sprawling and contradictory, seemed roomy enough to hold every unfinished part?

### *Mumbai: Baptism by Cacophony*

We landed in Mumbai in 2004, an urban cacophony that reflected our own disorientation and impetuous decision-making. The airfare paid in equal parts bravado and naïveté. The city hit us like a cymbal crash, the lack of toilets, rickshaw horns, hanging off urban and suburban trains, the crush of fifteen million heartbeats moving in cross-rhythms. Each alley smelled of

cardamom and diesel, wealth and want braided tight. It mirrored our own chaos so precisely; I felt seen.

From the moment we landed in Mumbai, I insisted to my wife that I wanted her to reopen communication with her family in Thailand. I didn't want them to worry too much and I didn't want them to imagine that she had been kidnapped, or that something bad could have happened. At first reluctant but soon it became easy and necessary to message them updates. Her dad was still angry, understandably, and she was no longer under his control or so I thought. Plans for the future were still elusive.

### *Goa: Paradise Compared to Mumbai*

We fled south to Goa, hoping the shoreline could quiet the noise inside our heads. Goa was our first reprieve, a coastal sanctuary still resonant with the ghost of the 1960s counterculture. The atmosphere was intoxicating: Trance music echoing across beaches, air perfumed by incense and hashish, an unspoken promise of timelessness. The plan I came up with was to spend the majority of our time in Goa at a small non-touristy beach town where simple guest houses cost $1 - 2 USD per night and we could eat fresh caught seafood with coconut rice for about. 25 -. 50 cents per plate. The plan was not regrettable. We stayed for a month. We could have easily stayed longer but we wanted to explore more of India, a lot more of India.

*Drifting, South, North, East, West*

Monsoon rain stitched silver threads across Kerala's palm-fringed backwaters and verdant landscapes. Tamil Nadu's temple bells rang like questions I couldn't yet translate. Among Karnataka's crumbled ruins, history felt both eternal and dust-fragile. Andhra Pradesh offered long corridors of quietude where our own thoughts could finally catch up. India's tempo swung between lullaby and drumline, matching our internal oscillations, hope one day, dread the next.

Among the many profound experiences, our time in Bodh Gaya was transformative. As the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, it vibrated with spiritual potency and bhang lassi, containing cannabis mixed with powerful psychedelics; all de facto legal in this town. I found myself inexplicably drawn to the quiet gravity of the Mahabodhi Temple. Pilgrims of countless nationalities converged there in reverence. It was a space that dissolved dichotomies, East and West, faith and reason, and made room for subtler states of wonder.

Varanasi was a fever dream of fire and river, cremation smoke twisting with dawn fog, an unceasing reminder that everything ends. In Madhya Pradesh vast stretches of emptiness echoed my own hollow spaces. Kolkata dripped colonial melancholy yet

pulsed with fierce intellect, showing me decay and dignity can share the same doorway.

### *Northward to Ladakh: High-Altitude Truths*

We pushed through Delhi's sprawl to Chandigarh's order and from there we climbed the Himalayan foothills in buses. We spent weeks staying next to the Dalhi Lama's house. We then continued by jeeps toward Ladakh. Up there, the sky sprawled like an unrolled scroll, the silence so wide it felt like mercy. There, amidst high-altitude deserts, prayer-flag-strewn monasteries, and Tibetan Buddhist rhythms, we found a fragile sense of belonging. The Himalayas stripped life to its elemental core. The air was thin but the silence expansive. At times, it felt like we were brushing the hem of the ineffable. For brief days I could breathe without the weight of memory, we stayed as long as we could until my body began revolting.

### *Illness as Oracle*

I had foolishly gambled on street food and tap water since arriving to the subcontinent; India called my bluff. Bad bacteria and parasites colonized my gut and fevers spiked. Hospitals were reasonably affordable and efficient. Each serious cramp felt like an exorcism. Lying on vinyl beds, I saw how easily the body surrenders, and how fiercely the spirit can cling. These

were not only small medical crises; they became metaphors for a larger vulnerability.

After nearly 9 months backpacking in India, we knew that enough was enough. By the time we reached the Dalai Lama's home, and before that, my new wife and I were starting to have daily arguments. We were both immature and inexperienced. Her family invited us to return to Thailand immediately. We found out she was pregnant. It made sense she needed to return to Thailand to have greater stability for her and the baby. The return was conditional that we would need to live under her father's roof subject to his authority and rules.

After a year of vast horizons, obeying her father's rules felt like stepping back into a childhood closet and locking the door. Depression seeped into every corner. After nearly a year of expansive movement and self-discovery, this felt like a return to captivity. I relived the emotional imprisonment of my youth, controlled, silenced, and unseen. The dissonance was suffocating.

I was young and dumb. I told my wife I had to go somewhere. I did. I matched up with old friends in Bangkok and we went to one of the infamous Full Moon Parties in southern Thailand. I cheated on my wife. I knew it was wrong and I felt extremely sad. I left one of the condom wrappers in my luggage, probably

not by accident but rather as a way to let her know what had transpired and to share my transgressions. As soon as she found the condom wrapper in my luggage, she ran to the bathroom where she proceeded to unscrew a bottle of pure bleach that was sitting on the bathroom floor. She lifted the bottle up to her mouth, tears carving salt tracks down her cheeks, when I suddenly sprung into action. I ran to her and I knocked the bottle out of her hand before she was able to ingest any of it. I then carried her downstairs where I tried to explain to her mom and her sister about what had happened.

Telling her family, I braced for anger. What came was numb resignation, a silence heavy enough to bend the air. None of us possessed the language to name our shared cage, let alone pick the lock. Of course, they blamed me for everything. My wife told me many times how her father had cheated on her mom with prostitutes at least a dozen times. The hypocrisy of his outrage seemed to go over everyone's heads except mine. As young and dumb as I was, I felt a deep sense of shame, but at that moment, I also felt a lack of empathy due to the hypocrisy.

Contents

CONTENTS

# Woke up in truth

# Betrayal across oceans

# Chapter 9

# Thailand to Portland

The end of my marriage in Thailand didn't unravel; it detonated. One sweltering night my former father-in-law slid a pistol from his glove compartment and laid it on the console between us. Symbolic. No argument, no tears, just the metallic click of a safety pulled back. The same pistol was brandished again when he and I were alone for a brief moment in his truck on the divorce day. Then me and my soon to be ex-wife, her parents, and her sister drove to the local amphoe district office to sign the divorce papers. I did not agree to what I saw in the papers but I was being threatened to sign with a firearm waiting outside. The parts of the divorce agreement that I was able to read seemed excessively one-sided and unfair, especially after everything.

*Trying to Be in Thailand*

And still, I stayed in Thailand, two more years of haunted inertia. I remembered my dad's divorce growing up and how much he eternally hated my mom afterward. I did not want to hate my ex. I wanted to forgive her and her father and I always hoped they would forgive me too.

Teaching became my life raft. No degree? No matter. Classrooms of bright-eyed kids let my self-taught knowledge breathe: English idioms, the logic of algebra, the marvel of photosynthesis. Their curiosity steadied me when nightmares of that pistol jolted me awake.

I ended up finding my own cheap, basic, small apartment on Sukhumvit Soi 19, which if you aren't familiar with Bangkok, is pretty much as good as it gets for location.

Evenings I drifted into the orbit of Aussie expat friends. Two Aussie brothers who I became close friends with let their apartment be our social hub. I would go over there anytime. They even left the door unlocked for me and let me borrow a key to come and go.

Over cannabis joints and Thai beer, we swapped advice, stories, and experiences. Neither of the brothers were stupid enough to do what I had done with

marrying a Thai girl with a crazy controlling family. They thought I was an inexperienced idiot, and they were absolutely right.

We went to a lot of clubs together on the weekends in all parts of Bangkok. One night at a club with my mates, and in that hazy camaraderie, I met a woman whose energy and presence was special. She was everything my ex-wife was not: More open-minded, quick-witted, extra caring, and independent. Her presence was a balm. Her father, who I met a few weeks later, was everything my former father-in-law was not: Gracious, calm, and open-hearted. He welcomed me into their home with a generosity that felt redemptive. She became my girlfriend who I spent every moment with when I wasn't working.

Months later my visa was expiring and so was the agreement for my rental apartment. I decided after nearly three years to return to the United States, with plans to regroup and return for my girlfriend. A couple months after that, I learned she had been unfaithful and cheated on me with multiple guys. She must have felt so alone after I left. When I asked her why she did it, she said it's because she thought I was not coming back. I told her hundreds of times I would absolutely be back for her, and that I believed our bond could endure temporary separation. She met an Italian guy the following year and married him and moved to Italy. In reality though, I must have lost her

at the airport when we said, “I love you,” and I flew to America.

In 2005, I was back in Portland with a bag and zero addresses. Craigslist became my compass. By effort and luck, I met a man who was about to travel to China to handle his late father being honored at a Wuhan university. Within 24 hours of meeting, this man handed me the keys to his whole life: His house, his truck, and the responsibility of caring for his dog. It was an act of trust that felt surreal. His home, nestled near Mount Tabor, offered shelter for nearly three months. I spent three months of autumn bliss in southeast Portland by myself trying to make friends. Occasionally, a homeless person would come to the door to ask for something and I would try to give. When the owner returned, he let me remain as long as I wanted.

However, there were some unexpected problems when the man returned from his trip to China. Bottles multiplied, doors were left yawning open to the night. His alcoholism turned rooms into minefields of slurred apologies. I packed quietly.



An American girl, who I had become close with, offered me to stay with her and her young daughter in the nearby Woodstock neighborhood. One rain-soaked evening I spilled every secret: Gunpoint divorce, half-healed heartbreak, the constant hum of grief. She listened, then gently said she couldn’t

compete with ghosts. We parted with softness shortly afterward.

I did more housesitting in Portland until the spring. My longing and restlessness to return to Asia was a broken record. This time I was drawn to meet someone new who I had been corresponding with online. She was a nice girl. The months with her were a memorable long-story. Though not a story for this chapter. I was right next door to Vietnam so I traveled to Vietnam for the first time. I had been reading about Vietnam for years. I did an insane amount of travel in Vietnam. That was before Vietnam was on every western tourist's radar. North, South, East, West, I tried to absorb its rich, layered history.

After Vietnam, I wanted to see how China compared. A country then undergoing a dramatic period of modernization. After traveling for months, I found work as both an advisor and teacher in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Weekend trips to Hong Kong. I had several close friends in HK, and for a while HK was also a base. I lived in Shanghai and Beijing for some time. I then moved to Dalian and I found a job at a major Chinese university. They hired me for their IT staff. They provided a cozy apartment. I enjoyed Dalian, and I had friends from Beijing and Guangzhou come to visit me. High-speed trains were beginning to stitch China together. My American passport drew curiosity, not contempt, until a mention of Taiwan froze smiles

mid-conversation. I had recently spent months working in Taiwan too.

In Beijing, the following year, I met a Mongolian woman whose quiet steadied my racing pulse. We rode north to her homeland where the steppe stretched like eternity laid flat. Gers glowed under star-drenched skies, and horse hooves beat rhythms older than any nation-state. My experiences in Mongolia were absolutely incredible. That Mongolian girl was very nice and friendly but I wasn't looking for anything serious at the time; still reeling from past wounds. That was my mistake and an opportunity lost but I was not aware at the time to realize it.

Not too long after, I ended up in a special relationship in Beijing that would later turn into a long-distance relationship. She would eventually find a way to come live in America and even somehow found a job working at a university in Arkansas. Much later on, when I was back in America, I traveled to Arkansas to stay with her, and those were mostly blissful months.

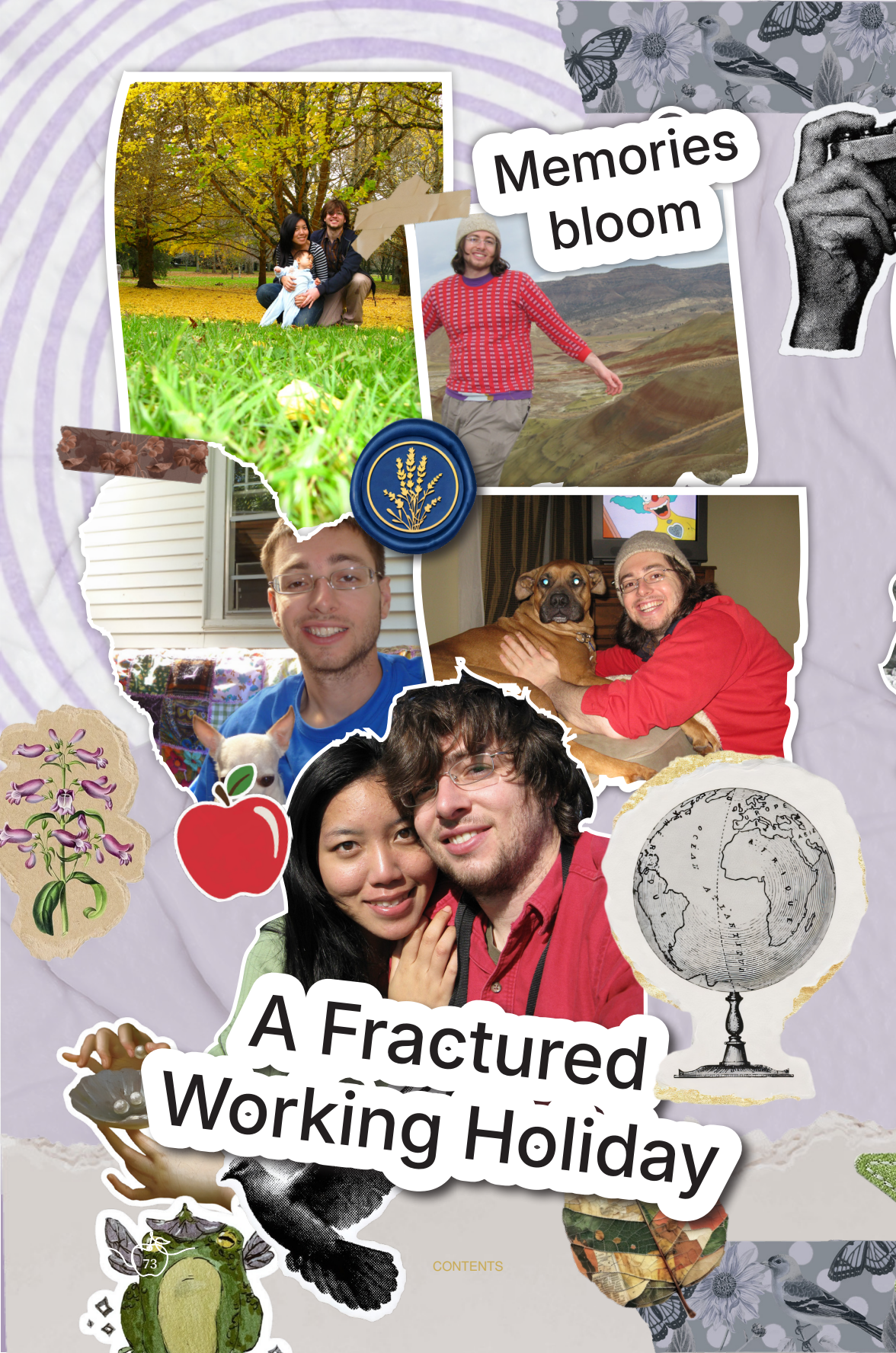
Back in Asia, I took multiple trips to Korea and many Asian countries. Reflecting on these years, I see my journey across Asia as a kind of psychogeographic map, a representation of both outer movement and inner transformation. I traveled extensively, visiting nearly every country in Asia. The notable exceptions, The three B's: Brunei, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, stand

as curiosities, countries not yet seen but perhaps intentionally skipped. Their absence does not diminish the journey; it simply adds mystery to an otherwise exhaustive exploration.

Always navigating two completely different worlds. The world in the local locale as well as trying to keep track of life intentionally left in America. I frequently connected with my elder father, being only close family. I called him often to see if he needed help and to share dialogue.

The arc of these years was not linear but spiral. With each return, each departure, what I sought was more than an escape, it was understanding, a desire to contextualize my life experiences within broader human and cultural narratives. Movement was my method; insight was the aim. A life experience still unfolding, constantly reframed by the places, people, and possibilities encountered. A hunger to understand and be understood, freedom of movement, pain and pleasure. Always seeking a good temporary or permanent family and home. Can others relate?

Contents


Memories bloom
A Fractured Working Holiday

# 10

## Dreams hide in plain pain

# Chapter 10

# A Fractured Working Holiday, New Zealand

By 2007, my mind felt like a cracked windshield, held together only by the stubbornness of its own fractures. China had left me overstimulated and threadbare, so I pointed myself toward New Zealand, imagining its distance from China and open spaces could feel refreshing. Far away mountains, sheep, silence: A prescription for recovery, or so I believed.

I landed carrying cautious optimism and a stack of Couchsurfing contacts. The very first host shattered that hope. One night's sleep, no explanation, just a curt "You need to go." I chalked it up to bad chemistry until the pattern repeated like a haunting refrain.

### *Whiplash Hospitality*

The next place to crash belonged to a South African woman living in Auckland who greeted me with a box of shelf stable brownies we could bake together.

Her laughter was so easy it felt rehearsed. We made brownies, I ate some, we had a pleasant conversation about China, and then I went to sleep on the couch. I have no idea what happened to her mental state but when I woke up, anger, vague, sharp, unanswerable, filled the kitchen air. Her sudden rage chased me out the door, heart hammering louder than my suitcase wheels on the pavement.

### *Road-Trip with a Stranger and the Ocean's Brutality*

Still greedy for connection, I met a woman from a dating site. She invited me to stay at her house for a few days and she asked me if I wanted to visit up north. We drove up to the beaches outside of Whangārei. I went swimming alone and got caught in a powerful rip current. I was pulled far from shore. For an intense 20 or 30 minutes, I wasn't sure I'd make it back. Fighting the ocean pushed me beyond what I thought I could handle, physically and mentally. I barely made it back to the shore still gasping for breath. I looked for the woman who I had rode there with but I didn't see her anywhere. She went back to her car. Perhaps I owe survival to years of swimming practice in Florida's oceans.

When we drove back to Auckland, there was a surprise: She wasn't single. Her partner's unexpected entrance turned the living room into a pressure cooker of accusations. Her family's voices escalated,

police were summoned, and I stood there this time as an accidental villain.

### *A Kindness in Auckland*

Not every door slammed in Auckland. A gay Taiwanese Couchsurfing host welcomed me with jokes that cut through the static. We traded midnight philosophy over stir-fried noodles. His generosity pressing a temporary hand to my frayed nerves. After spending some time with this gentle, kind, open-hearted guy, I decided it was time to see the rest of New Zealand. I didn't wish to overstay my welcome or push my luck.

I zig-zagged the country with a company named Naked Bus. I had planned all the trips weeks in advance. Naked Bus had a promotion for $1 NZD fares on all of their routes. I booked as many as I could to see all parts of New Zealand. Everywhere and in between: Well-known cities and towns, the famous national parks, and off-the-beaten-path ones.

In one town a lesbian couple offered me their couch. They generously offered to lend me their bicycle for a 5 KM trip to visit a river and nature area in their town. I stupidly lost their house key at the river, an ordinary key with nothing written on it. When I got back; panic ensued. Immediately I offered to pay to replace their key. They said that wasn't good enough and they would need the entire door to be replaced by me. They were

saying they might call the police regarding their lost key. Their fear painted me as dangerous for a simple mistake.

Couch surfing stays in NZ blurred into a montage of chaotic homes: One where a full on loud alcoholic party was spiraling out of control. I arrived there after an eight hour bus journey. A family of 12 on the west coast transforming from manic charm to icy withdrawal within a day. I felt less like a guest and more like a trigger for people's unresolved issues. I don't know why I had so many bad couch surfing experiences in New Zealand compared to other countries.

However, one good thing happened. While I was visiting Fiordland National Park, I randomly met a kind hearted Thai girl there with her family. I went up and talked to her a little bit in English and a little bit in Thai. We exchanged contact information and kept in touch.

On the way back to Auckland, I met a kind California expat living in Palmerston North with Parkinson's. She invited me to stay for a month. Her hands trembled but her spirit stood tall. We talked a lot about travel, life, and politics. She was able to joke and laugh a lot. I helped her with things she was having difficulties with due to her Parkinson's. The month there was easy.

In Auckland, I wasn't going to chance it again with strangers. I asked the Taiwanese guy if I could stay with him again, and he was like yes! The Thai girl I met down south was working as an au pair in Auckland for a year. I got the chance to connect with her again and we hit it off. We became very close in Auckland over a period of weeks. My Taiwanese friend / host offered to invite her to his place. Once they met, he said she was welcome to come anytime. We spent a good number of blissful days together and I always wished it could have been more.

I had already planned my return to America from New Zealand and paid for the non-refundable ticket. My plans couldn't be cancelled or postponed. My fear of flying had become something overwhelming. So I found another way: I booked a two-week trip on a cargo freighter: Auckland to Ensenada, Mexico. Two weeks of steel corridors, salt air, and horizon. No Wi-FI, just the ocean's indifferent lullaby, and small talk with the majority Filipino crew of the ship. We stopped in Tahiti for a day. It was one of the best days due to the random people I happened to meet and the perfect timing with a French art and music festival happening in Papeete.

### *Mexico's Gentle Re-entry*

When the ship got to Mexico, I traveled through many cities on a shoestring as I couch surfed with Mexican

hosts. Mexico City's whirl of color and Guadalajara's plazas met me like open arms. I went to family events with hosts. Street-vendor tacos, museum halls echoing with distant empires, strangers quick to smile, all slowly sanded memories of New Zealand's jagged edges. People were nice and I started to feel at ease. I was missing two people from NZ though.

### *Crossing into Texas*

I was taking buses all the way from Mexico City to Portland. I traversed from bus carrier to bus carrier to Greyhound. Stopping in various North American places. When I got to Portland, I couch surfed with an Ecuadorian friend until I could line up house-sitting gigs for myself.

### *What New Zealand Etched into Me*

New Zealand promised peace and delivered an unstable truce: Like a mirror, everywhere I turned, I saw reflections of my own turbulence. Majestic landscapes framed human interactions that swung from tender to terrifying. Each unsettling encounter echoed my inner fragmentation; each act of kindness proved the fracture wasn't total.

The journey didn't heal me, it diagnosed me. It showed that running toward calm landscapes won't quiet storms still pacing the mind. It flashed a warn-

ing light which I had yet learned to heed: Deeper collapse always waits around the bend.

Warnings can sometimes foreshadow events. Bad experiences can offer guidance. And so I carry New Zealand with me: The riptide that threatened to claim me, the strangers who held space, the soaring mountains in the south that watched as silent witnesses. They remind me that the path to wholesomeness isn't paved in postcard scenery, it's carved in the raw honesty of confronting what follows you, no matter how far you roam.

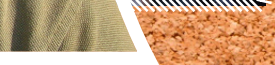
Contents

# Constant Culture Shock

## Culture shock and isolation

## Escaping to reset

# 11



# Chapter 11

# Navigating Worlds, Constant Culture Shock and Reverse

Portland is my home and home base. It's my emergency shelter. The culture is a struggle for me though especially compared to Asia or the South Pacific. Maybe America in general. Where the struggle is real and has only become more and more real as time disappears. Incalculable times I've stumbled back, caught my breath, and, before comfort could numb me, I've hit my limit. I have had to take breaks to reframe things or else risk insanity.

I actually love the rain but absolutely cannot stand the cold. I hate cold weather more than almost anything. I grew up in a warm humid climate and spent half my life in warm humidity. The fact that most native Oregonians seem to enjoy 67 F (19 C) inside the house during winter is maddening, though not surprising as those who grew up in colder climates cope well with

colder temperatures and feel more comfortable. It's extremely challenging to find any landlord or roommate to live with. I've never had so many roommates breathing down my neck as the ones I've had over the years in Portland. Passive-aggression notched up to the max.

You have two extremes: You have the homeless folks on the streets who might need to set fires to survive to yell obscenities on hard drugs. You have the snobby folks, holier than thou, who are mechanical and authoritative with their personal rules with little wiggle room or flexibility in their minds. It's like two kinds of insane asylums running at once. It's lacking the kindness, hospitality, and courteousness of many of the other cultures I've experienced.

A lot of the above could apply in general to Americans. Many Americans are instilled with being self-centered and self-righteous. America often feels mono-cultural, and seemingly contradictory, punitive toward those who deviate from social pressures in their respective segregated tribes. Now-a-days people feel they have to subscribe to one tribe or the opposite. There are different stripes but eventually everyone gets cooked in the American melting pot.

If there were better economic equality then these issues would be lesser. There is too much wealth being handed to the top. There are too few opportunities for

equality. I grew up in this culture but absolutely feel the intense disdain some folks have for American culture.

America is an overtly extroverted culture. Lots of loud people who learned to be loud. Loudness is not truth as we are misled to believe. Too many people in America have too many loud opinions about things they themselves have no actual life experience with. In general, most don't actually know what's happening in the world or what other places outside of America are actually like. Change is another thing that's challenging for most Americans to grasp. They picture places frozen in time. Other lifestyles in the world are a mystery.

America needs affordable housing built. Landlords and corporations hold too much power in American cities. The situation is completely out of control. It would require the intervention of the federal government trying to do the right thing to help the poorer people have access to affordable housing on a wide scale. Why can't America seem to be able to do it?

Health care was somewhat moving in a positive direction with more Americans being able to get coverage. Recently it's been moved in a significantly worse direction for everyday Americans.

I have to take breaks from America because otherwise I would go insane from helplessly watching the dysfunction. Going outside of America helps me see what places are doing better and doing better in what. It helps reframe and recalibrate my brain. To look back and have a reflection to internalize the positives and the pitfalls. More people should try it.

I would leave Portland again to ride Amtrak trains and Greyhound buses for a week to reach western Massachusetts, to again stay with someone I only knew from online. I had never been to Massachusetts and I was curious about life in the New England states.

Winter there seemed to swallow sound. Snow barricaded doors, radiators wheezed like tired lungs. I spent the winter there thinking about how I could possibly afford to backpack Europe on a shoestring once the weather warmed up. So that's what I did!

I took flights from New York City to Athens, Greece for the start of this journey across Europe. Food over-priced in Euros drained my limited budget, and the woman offering her couch expected my heart, and body, in return. I hadn't meant to disappoint her; I simply hadn't learned to carry anyone else's longing when my own longing was already preoccupied.

I had a lot of Couch Surfing contacts in Bulgaria, so I went there next. One Couch Surfer opened her fam-

ily's farmhouse to me. She lived in a small town and it was a perfect base to explore eastern Europe. The couch surfer and I got along so well that we did almost everything together. We hitchhiked through Serbia and Romania, and of course, as much of Bulgaria as possible. We strolled through gypsy neighborhoods and ancient sites.

We traveled together across central Europe spanning time and eventually hit western Europe. I made travel plans with other travel partners too. I linked up with new people to criss-cross the European continent multiple times. I had a one month house-sitting in the center of Paris but I absolutely hated the high costs, tourism culture, and pompousness of Paris. I visited almost every country in Europe on that first trip. I eventually went back later for the remaining unvisited countries. After Europe, I washed back onto Portland's rainy streets.

Contents

# Body positivity

# Digital Frontiers Gone Wild and Trees

# House-sitting as stability

# 12

## Chapter 12

# Digital Frontiers, Gone Wild and Trees, Cultivating Counterculture Communities

Upon returning to Portland, I entered a phase of relative stability, supported almost entirely through the instability of house-sitting from place to place. This unconventional yet sustaining arrangement allowed me to live minimally while circulating through more than thirty homes across the city. I cared for dogs, cats, gardens, and entire properties with a sense of quiet diligence. Each house became a lens through which I could observe the intricacies of Portland domestic life, how individuals and families construct meaning, comfort, and identity within private spheres. Perhaps these engagements doubled as an unstructured but profound form of ethnographic fieldwork for my inner child who is without stable love and support.

During this period, I created Gone Wild aka r/gonewild, an online community focused on sexual expression and body positivity. While I will delve a bit deeper into its sociocultural implications a bit later, its genesis represented a pivotal moment in my intellectual and personal journey. The platform emerged as a space where anonymity, performance, vulnerability, and agency intertwined. In many ways, it paralleled the themes I had explored in physical travel, such as: Identity, connection, and the varied ways people seek intimacy in uncertain or unfamiliar spaces.

From Ulanbartaar to Invercargill, Rayong to Guilin, Great Barrington to Plovdiv, Somosomo to Celaya, back to Portland, a consistent thread revealed itself: A relentless pursuit of understanding. I was not collecting mere passport stamps, I was accumulating life experience, beginning to learn how to efficiently process cultural narratives, and challenging my own assumptions. The world was not a passive backdrop to my story but an active collaborator. Every outward journey mirrored an inward inquiry. Every border crossed elicited a deeper existential reflection.

During one of my longer house-sitting stints in Sandy, Oregon, a modest, woodsy town on the outskirts of Portland, I found myself in a surprisingly productive and contemplative headspace. I was caring for the home and dogs of an older couple who, despite their frequent and animated arguments, treated me with

remarkable warmth. Their home nestled near the Sandy Airport and close to the tranquil Sandy River, provided a secluded and serene atmosphere to serve as the unlikely incubator for digital communities that would have far-reaching cultural impacts.

In this quiet chapter of my life, I conceived and launched r/gonewild on Reddit (January 2012). At the time, there were no mainstream platforms where adults could authentically and voluntarily share nude images of themselves in a body-positive, non-commercial context. I saw a cultural gap and sought to fill it, not with explicit content for exploitation, but with a space for mutual appreciation, consent, and radical self-expression. What emerged was something more influential than I had initially imagined: a community driven by agency, not objectification; by authenticity, not performance. Someone else focused on dollar signs, who saw the concept in action likely inevitably commercialized this concept with Only Fans.

I immersed myself fully in shaping r/gonewild. From its design and rules to its outreach and cultural tone, every detail bore my imprint. I moderated reasonably, refined the aesthetics, and cultivated an environment that felt affirming, safe, and inclusive. This was not about titillation, it was about liberation. It felt like a small revolution at the time, particularly on Reddit, where such content had traditionally been framed by the lens of voyeurism rather than empowerment.

Riding the momentum of that success, I pivoted to a project rooted in another of my longstanding passions: Cannabis advocacy. Drawing on my earlier engagement with online harm reduction communities like Bluelight, I launched r/trees, a subreddit dedicated to cannabis culture. I envisioned it as an antidote to both the burnout of Reddit's default snark and the stigma that had long surrounded cannabis use. I wanted r/trees to be the most welcoming, laid-back corner of the internet, a digital living room where curiosity, humor, and openness would flourish.

From its inception, I carefully designed r/trees. I curated much of the visual branding and helped establish a lexicon and tone that would define the space for years to come. "Ents," pineapples looking like cannabis, cannabis legalization, these weren't just catchphrases; they were cultural markers. As the subreddit exploded in popularity, I found myself not only running a community but also helping to steer the broader public discourse around cannabis.

Advocacy organizations took notice. Campaigners for legalization initiatives in states like Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and California reached out to me, seeking collaboration. I lent my time freely, designing viral marketing memes, orchestrating awareness campaigns, and amplifying the message through the community I had built. These efforts were never

about financial gain. In fact, I was still living frugally, relying on house-sitting gigs to get by.

As the r/trees brand became synonymous with the cannabis movement, big and small business owners began approaching me. They wanted to create Trees branded merchandise: T-shirts, hemp accessories, digital vaporizers. At first, I was hesitant. One business guy specifically managed to change my mind on it. He told me bluntly that one way or another he would be commercializing my brand. When I confided in him that my long-term dream was to create a non-profit organization to advocate for cannabis culture and legalization, he told me that maybe this was my chance to someday make that long-term goal a reality. I agreed to a few small-scale partnerships, accepting modest commissions, usually around 5 - 15% of profits on direct sales of products I sold, to help sustain my life. It wasn't a windfall, but it allowed me to continue my work on Trees primarily focused on community-building and building brand recognition.

Conversations with leadership at NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws) further validated the work. They told me that r/trees had tapped into a demographic they had long struggled to reach at that time, particularly social media and early 20s. The head of NORML's recognition of my branding, marketing, and non-profit advocacy, bolstered

my resolve. I was helping shape the future of cannabis commercialization, culture, and legalization.

My role became all-encompassing. Curating posts and discussion threads, every tweak to the user experience was part of a broader effort to normalize cannabis culture and reimagine online communities as spaces for connection and positive transformation in the real world. I was invited to speak at major cannabis events like HempFest in Seattle, and asked for interviews. I accepted them using my real name before legalization instead of hiding behind a pseudonym.

These weren't only communities. They were cultural ecosystems. They were the embodiment of a new kind of digital activism, playful but purposeful, irreverent but impactful. And they were personal. Every pixel and paragraph reflected my values, my convictions, and my desire to create spaces where people could be seen and supported.

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Contents

# 13

# Birth of My First Daughter

# Life shift

# Return to Vietnam

# Chapter 13

# Digital Media Empire and the Birth of my First Daughter

Over the course of five years, I cultivated Gone Wild and Trees into powerhouse brands and communities. At the same time, I was struggling to survive in America due to costs (and culture). House-sitting gigs in Portland were beginning to dry up, for me at least. Costs were rising and Portland was becoming a popular sanctuary for people to move to.

Asia tugging again at my sleeve. The gravitational pull of returning to east and southeast Asia proved too strong to resist. It was also a practical move to lessen costs of the burden to survive. I ran back to Vietnam, by chance I met a new relationship in Hanoi. Humid nights, alleyway pho, motorbike choirs, and the woman whose apartment became my home too. It turned into one year in Vietnam interrupted with numerous side-trips to different spots in Asia to obtain

visas for Vietnam, to maximize my time there, which is what I always try to do. Over the course of a year, the relationship with the Vietnamese woman evolved, and she eventually became pregnant, a development whose implications would unfold more fully in subsequent years. Living in Vietnam once again immersed me in a culture defined by its own distinct history, spiritual frameworks, and socio-economic transitions. At one point in Vietnam, I experienced a spontaneous mental breakdown due to an OCD-like focus on my brands and simultaneously trying to cope with the nonstop chaos of Hanoi. Experiencing mental breaks like other health conditions, if self-aware, can be a life experience unto itself. Battling myself has led to a string of losing battles in my war for sanity. I think I've always tried to learn from them. Though it's been tough being self-critical past the point of unfairness and being easily affected by other people's harsh words.

By the way, before I left Portland to travel back to Asia, I stopped in San Francisco for a house-sitting gig, and went to the Reddit Halloween party. I met the co-founders of Reddit, Steve Hoffman and Alexis Ohanian, both of whom seemed to show me a bit of enthusiasm when I casually mentioned that I am in fact the creator of Gone Wild and Trees. I would later keep in touch with Alexis on a semi-regular basis, sharing achievements and ideas for Trees with him.

He seemed like a good dude and on board with what I was trying to accomplish. I would have called Alexis my friend except we only met once. Perhaps I was a friend to him, or perhaps I was a chat acquaintance; but either way our chat dialogue spanned years. I wanted to keep in touch with him but I was too distraught and ashamed of what was about to happen.

Two major tidal waves hit me at once, equal in force yet opposite in origin. The first was radiant: My partner in Vietnam was pregnant with our daughter. I felt the universe narrow to a single promise, be there when she arrives. The second wave occurred around the same time, invisible at first, gathering speed in the dark corners where outrage feeds faster than thought. When they collided, I discovered how joy and devastation can exist in the same breath.

I spent my free time drafting a blueprint for the idea of a nonprofit rooted in r/trees, nurtured from a seed into the largest cannabis related community in the world with a knack for advocacy. I dreamt of a structure as horizontal as a prairie: local chapters making their own calls, transparency baked into every ledger; with no fluff, and no vanity leadership.

With small money to work with, I figured I should take on the burden of learning how to make it myself. I didn't want to throw away my limited funds to incorporate the shell of something just to call it a day. I had

never had a business before until now, let alone a non-profit org.

From my perspective at the time, it seemed I should take time to learn how to kickstart a non-profit. I purchased books and started to read about the topic from scratch. There were so many ins and outs which I did not know. My total salary that year was $20,000. How to kickstart a non-profit with some of that? I should have started small and perhaps incorporated. I was trying to have the tree grown without planting the seed. I didn't have enough money to hire professionals to walk me through the process and I had no idea what I was doing.

I thought having the local chapters up and running first would be a better way to have real structure to what I was building. I spent months developing a web site called Weedit and there I began to flesh out those local chapters. I spent more months creating new communities on Reddit and social media to serve as local Trees chapters and other niches. Thinking that in time these chapters and niches would be the basis of the non-profit that I was working toward incorporating. I started interviewing people I knew through my volunteer advocacy to form a board of directors. I have heaps of chats and emails to back up my claims.

My daughter's birth in Vietnam was fast approaching. I struggled mightily with balancing Trees and my

daughter being born. I wanted to focus obsessively on my non-profit goal. At the same time, I needed to carve out time to be there for my daughter and partner. I truly get the importance now regarding the struggle for paternal / maternal leave rights especially in the United States and some developing countries. In my case, I was self-employed and just starting my venture.

I figured if I could be in Portland then it would be easier to connect with people I needed on the ground to incorporate the non-profit. On the other hand, there was no way to control when my baby daughter was going to be born in Vietnam. I couldn't ask them to come to Portland (no visa, costs, she was highly pregnant) which meant I had to be in Vietnam during this time. This is one of many facts that anonymous Reddit accounts were never aware of. After my daughter was born is when I put my work on a temporary pause because I made sure my new daughter and partner were set as the highest priority.

In those humid months back in Hanoi with my newborn daughter, I learned a new kind of awe, the quiet miracle of tiny lungs, the weight of commitment heavier than any brand I had created. During a layover in China on the journey back, my phone lit up with panic. Anonymous Reddit accounts had launched a barrage: I was a "fraud," "a thief," "creating a fake non-profit to pocket merch money." The truth was simple,

even boring, I earned a small amount of money from helping my business partners earn a lot. I was a new father and had temporarily put my work on hold. My personal income was what I hoped could launch and power the non-profit. The nonprofit wasn't live yet and how could it be? Was there an artificial deadline? I was earnestly working carefully toward my future goals. Context vanished in the algorithm's meat grinder.

Within hours my inbox was a furnace of death threats, slurs, screenshots of "reports" to the FBI. This went on for days. When I fell asleep for a few minutes, I was rudely awakened by the first major panic attacks of my life. Strangers dissected my supposed life like vultures on fresh carrion, each new lie amplifying the last. "The Daily Dot" and others wrote articles framing the defamation as fact without getting my side. I reached out to Reddit's leadership, people who knew me, who I had transparently worked with since day 1. Silence. Then, without warning, Reddit shadow banned (January 2012) my account without telling anyone. Years of work gone, my voice starkly cut mid-sentence. They handed my communities to others and washed their hands of it.

Business partners kept selling shirts, now without paying me. Contracts, verbal promises, shared history, erased. I stared at emptied revenue dashboards while hate mail piled up. The overnight loss wasn't just financial; it was existential. I had poured unpaid labor

and unguarded hope into a space that swallowed me whole while at the same moment trolls and new head moderators were having their Dec. 25. My life and my family's life was forever impacted.

I had met the General Manager, Erik Martin, and other Reddit leaders earlier that year when I was invited to hang with them at ROFLcon in Portland. Erik, who I'm sure was fully aware of my good intentions and plans as I had literally shared them all with him only a few months prior. Yet he still made the business decision to throw me under the bus with no concern for the human.

Alexis, I feel also was aware of my good intentions and was supportive over chat of the big goals that I had in the works, but unfortunately he was no longer at Reddit, as he was on a sabbatical in his family's home country of Armenia, trying to make the world suck a bit less. While my world was beginning to suck more than I could have ever imagined.

This all happened at the worst imaginable time. Right after my daughter was born. I'm transiting from Vietnam to China and on the way back to America, while I'm sleeping on a friend's cold couch in the middle of the night I begin to see the defamation. The Internet was slow and unreliable. Before I knew it, Reddit shadow banned my account in the most sneaky way possible, never telling anyone they did it, making it

appear as if I had disappeared, while at the same time making the corporate decision to turn over full control of my valuable communities. This pretty much put an end to the non-profit endeavor although I still tried to recover behind the scenes what Reddit had stolen from me in an instant.

The relationship between Reddit and myself seemed in the beginning to be mutually beneficial. I created two of Reddit's most famous and popular communities at the time. Reddit likely earned millions in advertising revenue from my work. I earned less than $20,000. There was no downside for Reddit and yet they still chose easier revenue over the human being. A trend which became apparent in multiple news articles in later years about Reddit. A disturbing but not surprising pattern for a corporation that's main objective is to maximize revenue.

Reddit has become a powerful monopoly. To the point where they almost function as public utility. They successfully monopolized Internet discussion forums by finding new ways to monetize human interaction. And I foolishly helped them. They are another heartless corporation designed to look out for themselves. Like most things, Reddit didn't start like this. Reddit became partly evil over time and I almost lost my life due to it. I came so close to suicide. The Reddit trauma and my own failures. I have been unable for many

years to regain a fraction of my lost identity; while also never getting recognition for work I deserved.

Yet underneath the wreckage, one fact glowed steady: My daughter existed. She needed a father who could look her in the eye without flinching. So I crawled forward, inch by inch, learning to breathe through the debris field of betrayal.

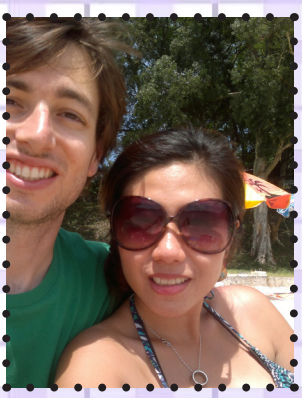
The consequences were and still are devastating for me in many ways. I was clinically diagnosed with PTSD due to the events that unfolded on Reddit. Few people even care to know the true story of what happened to me. The emotional toll of being vilified, erased, and abandoned triggered a psychological collapse. What I lost was not just a Reddit account or an online community, I lost a sense of purpose. I lost a platform that I had helped build through years of unpaid labor. It took over a decade for me to begin understanding the depth of that trauma. Incredible losses which caused such a huge strain on my family.

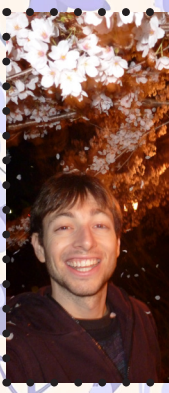
This chapter is more than a recounting of personal tragedy. It is a critique of the mechanisms that govern our digital lives. It is a study in the fragility of good faith in online spaces, the speed with which misinformation can become orthodoxy, and the ease with which platforms can abandon their most dedicated contributors. It reveals the dangerous power of digital mobs and the complicity of corporate structures

in enabling them. I never sought attention or fame. If anything I was in the background, as a wonk, constantly striving to make the world suck a bit less for everyone. Yet why did my life, and my family's lives, have to be shattered?

Above all, I am making a plea for empathy, for some recognition of what happened to me and the suffering that has been endured and through it all and how nothing has been made right. That there is a person with brave hopes, failings, and a life experience story that deserves to live. A Life Experience: The Shaun Apple Story. And I am here making my first real attempt at sharing this story with you about what happened to me and my family and everything else.

Contents





# Sakura in a Sea of Sorrows

14

# Exile from my own creation

# Chapter 14

# Sakura in a Sea of Sorrows (PTSD)

Following the catastrophic unraveling of my professional and personal identity, precipitated by having my reputation intentionally crushed to death by selfish and uncaring actors. And Reddit's abrupt and opaque shadowban, I entered a prolonged and multidimensional psychological freefall. Everything I had meticulously built over years, community ecosystems, digital brands, and platforms (both on Reddit and off) designed to promote altruistic, grassroots participation, was summarily dismantled in a matter of days. This dissolution occurred not through any formal inquiry or ethical arbitration, but via a virulent collision of mob mentality, unvetted misinformation, and institutional betrayal. Reddit, a company that I had given so much of my creative energy and personal ethos to for free, excised me as a business decision without explanation or recourse. The silence

was annihilating. I found myself exiled from the very communities I had popularized and created. The psychological vacuum left behind in me was filled with a dangerous amalgam of paranoia, despair, and cognitive fragmentation.

I was still in China in what was originally supposed to be a brief stopover on the way back home to Portland to finish work on the non-profit goal. Instead, with all the trauma and mental damage, I had to cancel my flights. The sheer veracity and scale of the digital character assassination I endured induced a profound rupture in my mental stability. I became consumed by a delusional belief that I was under surveillance. Convinced that the FBI had been mobilized against me due to a campaign of false reports, I descended into a state of hypervigilance, obsessive ideation, and persecutory delusion. My previously resilient grasp on reality deteriorated under the weight of relentless fear and spiraling intrusive thoughts.

In a desperate bid for psychological refuge, I needed to physically remove myself either by suicide or getting to somewhere where nobody knew me and I had never been to before. I picked Japan, a country I had long idealized for its philosophical aesthetics, cultural order, and contemplative spaces. I took the high-speed rail from Beijing to Shanghai to take an overnight ferry to Kansai, Japan. I connected with strangers through Couch Surfing and eventually found sanctuary in the

town of Kashihara, nestled in Nara Prefecture. One particularly generous host, a kind and unassuming woman, welcomed me into her modest apartment, offering me an oasis of mild stability amidst mental chaos. Life in Kashihara unfolded at a slower, gentler rhythm, simple meals, quiet train rides, and meditative walks through tranquil neighborhoods, which collectively offered me a temporary reprieve from my internal turmoil.

I was there losing track of time when suddenly one day I noticed something happening outside. It was during this fragile interlude that I encountered sakura, the cherry blossoms beginning to bloom. The ephemeral beauty of sakura petals appearing in the spring air slightly pierced my numbness and despair. For a fleeting moment, amidst the sea of emotional wreckage, I experienced something like wonder. It wasn't joy in any conventional sense, but a subtle break in the bleakness, a sensory flicker that hinted at the possibility of reconnection to anything. That momentary resonance became an emotional anchor, however tenuous, to a world that had otherwise lost all coherence to me and was spiraling out of control.

Despite the brief solace Japan offered, its high cost of living rendered my stay unsustainable. After 4 months in Japan, I returned to Hong Kong via China, relying on the kindness of Hong Konger friends for temporary accommodation. Still emotionally adrift and

financially unstable, I decided to retreat even further, from society, from myself, by relocating to India. It could have made sense to go back to Vietnam but you have to know that I was completely and utterly out of my mind (PTSD), and not operating practically in a rational sense. I had traveled India before in a spirit of adventure and discovery for a few dollars per day, but this time was different. My return was not about exploration. It was a selfish attempt at erasure.

I deliberately sought out remote, underdeveloped regions, places untouched by tourism, where I could vanish into the anonymity of the unfamiliar. North of India to Nepal, outside the sacred grounds of Lumbini, I contracted severe food poisoning that brought me perilously close to death. Almost ready to give up and immobilized by relentless nausea, vomiting, and dehydration, I brought myself into a Korean Buddhist monastery that had a guesthouse. Fortunately, there were not many guests staying there, otherwise they would have heard the unpleasant sounds of vomiting and diarrhea, for weeks.

There, I ate whatever I could. I was fortunate they had plenty of fermented foods, along with healthy and relatively sterile vegan foods, rice, and warm tea; all served buffet style offering unspoken compassion. With the very severe food poisoning, I could barely move for weeks. It took a long time to make it to the closest pharmacy to buy a course of antibiotics to

eventually stabilize my condition. My gastrointestinal system remained fragile for years, and yet the psychological trauma of the Reddit defamation would still continue to overshadow all.

In the months that followed, I drifted further. I formed a brief relationship with a Dutch-Nepalese woman and relocated to a small town in the Netherlands. The social and environmental stability of Dutch life, so antithetical to my inner disarray, only intensified my psychological dissonance at that moment. From there I returned to North America. I arrived in Montreal, Canada, with my timing coinciding with the peak of autumn foliage. The sight of vibrant, decaying leaves mirrored my emotional state, elegantly unraveling, quietly fading.

From there, I embarked on an extended, near-nomadic expedition across the United States using promotional $1 bus fares. I zig-zagged again for cheap fares. This time from Vermont to New York, through Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Georgia, etc. Florida to see my dad before heading westward to Nebraska, Colorado, California, and many places in between. Which perfectly described me. Each place brought a place to crash and a new attempt to articulate the inexpressible. I told my story in fragmented narratives, seeking coherence that eluded me. The people I met responded with a spectrum of reactions, curios-

ity, discomfort, skepticism, reflecting back to me my own instability and mental anguish.

When I got home to Portland, it wasn't particularly the place I remembered. Perhaps it had changed or I had changed. The costs had started to rise after the Great Recession, and the city was experiencing an increase in societal issues. The show 'Portlandia'had recently popularized the city to the mainstream which brought new aspects to the city. I walked familiar streets like a ghost, invisible yet burdened with the weight of a thousand invisible wounds. I was disconnected from the real life community that I had cultivated in Portland only a year prior. I was too annihilated to reach out for help and too humiliated to seek any real support.

And yet, despite everything, I persisted. Not with triumph, and certainly not with clarity, but with endurance. I continued to breathe. I frequently thought of my daughter in Vietnam. This survival was not redemptive; it offered no vindication. In trauma's long shadow, the quiet act of surviving, of simply enduring, became the most radical and necessary form of healing. Others may have simply killed themselves. I lived to experience life and suffer longer.

Contents

# 15 Reflection

Half my life in Asia

Reunion felt like oxygen

# Chapter 15

# Reflection

After the storm chronicled in 'The Sakura and the Sea of Sorrows,'I reached Portland feeling like a ghost revisiting his own footprints. What once had been refuge now felt like purgatory, familiar streets looping me back to the same questions. Reddit's takeover of the communities I'd built wasn't just corporate housekeeping; it felt like someone had slipped inside my chest and stolen the furniture. Every project, every username, every late-night thread that once anchored me, gone forever.

In that vacuum a single invitation appeared: A new friend from Wyoming, who I met online, offered me a place to stay outside of Cheyenne. I said yes before hesitation could catch up.

Wyoming's vast quiet startled me slightly awake, the wind, the distant howl of coyotes, horizons so wide they made breathing easier. I stayed for mere months,

but the dislocation gave my grief a different sky to echo against and added another improbable line to my résumé of homes. A nice trip had been made between Portland and Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah.

Back in Portland, the city felt smaller and louder all at once. One day a simple calculation stopped me mid-stride: I had spent nearly half my life in Asia. For a kid from a southern town where Asian culture was a rumor at best, that realization of half my life felt like touching a mirror and seeing someone else's reflection.

I returned to Asia to visit my daughter in Vietnam. After my Vietnamese visa expired, I traveled to the Philippines. I spent time in the Philippines and decided well I guess this is my life now. I'm completely lost. Immediately after that I met someone in the Philippines and it seemed we were meant to be serious together. I was lost as my relationship in Vietnam had abruptly ended in part due to the trauma and distress caused by the Reddit / PTSD situation. I had found someone new in the Philippines, and we seemed serious about each other.

Searching for momentum in trying to look upward, I decided to apply for university for the first time in my life. I got accepted into university. Instead of a bustling campus, I chose a small state school in La Grande, eastern Oregon, conservative, devout, and

nothing like the Portland bubble. After time in the Philippines, I traveled back to the U.S. for the start of my university life. For one term I squeezed my barely thirty-something self into a dorm room before realizing I needed to rent a simple apartment nearby instead. The echo of freshman chatter felt odd.

La Grande surprised me with pockets of grace. Nearby Wallowa Lake, Walla Walla, and even the breathtaking autumn colors outside of Baker City. At the end of the term, a friend from Hong Kong flew to Oregon to visit me. I drove 5 hours to Portland and 5 hours back to pick her up. Together we drove through Eastern Oregon's emptiness, camping atop Steens Mountain, tracing desert highways under skies unscarred by city glare. Stillness replaced motion; in that stillness I realized healing doesn't always require movement, it sometimes asks for new roots? Honestly, my roots still felt diseased from toxic poison and unable to grow back.

It was already winter break, and I needed to get out of the extremely cold semi-desert air. I took a cheap flight to Panama City, Panama and proceeded to travel, on a shoestring, on a string of buses across central America, visiting all of those countries, before ending up in Mexico, where I spent the remainder of school break in small towns in central Mexico and the Yucatan.

I became OCD about something new; maintaining a 4.0 GPA at university, which I did. Riding that momentum, I joined a national university exchange program, and later that summer would find myself studying on Hawaii's Big Island. Yet paradise echoed hollow. Perhaps it was the recent trauma or pure loneliness but I ended up not wanting to be in paradise at that time. Headlines of school shootings back on the mainland added another layer of dread. One evening, I stared at an emergency campus text alert and realized my body had begun cataloging exits every time I entered a classroom. My partner waited in the Philippines, distance stretching between us like low tide. Hawaii's high price tags and the isolation I felt there only magnified the mega ache. I withdrew, packed up, and flew back to the Philippines via Japan.

Reunion felt like oxygen. Some months later, our new daughter, Eon, arrived, tiny fingers curling around responsibilities I hadn't fully lived up to yet. We searched the islands for a place soft enough to raise her and, after some time in the Visayas, we landed on a rental on the outskirts of Baguio, high in Luzon's mountains. The house sat wrapped in pine mist. Mornings began with rooster calls and ended with the hush of distant traffic. Days blurred into a gentle loop: Diapers, feedings, taxis into town, whispered hopes over black rice and fried plantains. Exhaustion gnawed, but meaning filled the gaps. For the first time

in years, life felt simple enough to hold. After some months, our rental lease was coming to an end. With news of an approaching super typhoon to Luzon, I chose caution for us and made sure we left early. A few days later there were numerous landslides along the route from Baguio.

Leaving Baguio, I understood I was no longer only a vagabond and wanderer collecting passport stamps or a fugitive from grief. I was a father, a partner, and a man whose compass now pointed toward stability. Uncertainty still stretched ahead, but I carried my intention like a lantern, enough light to see the next step, and for now, I suppose that was the best I could do.

Contents

16
The Shape of Belonging

I collect humanity
Some memories are worth
CONTENTS
128

# Chapter 16

# The Shape of Belonging with Couch Surfing

Imagine trying to gather every place your soul has ever exhaled, every rooftop sunrise, every bus station goodbye, into one pair of trembling hands. That's what it feels like whenever I'm asked, "Where are you from?" I've walked the arteries of nearly every European cultural capital, inhaled the seasons of Asia, stepped foot across Oceania, jolted down the backbone of north and central America on buses that rattled like undeliverable prayers. With each entry and exit, an old certainty peeled away, and a new piece of humanity fused to my skin.

Couchsurfing soon became my only inheritance in everything but name. I'd grown up where skin color drew hard lines and poverty shrank futures. Home was a place I tiptoed around, never sure when the floor might give. Accepting a stranger's spare blanket

rewired that caution: Maybe safety could temporarily be shared, even if permanence couldn't.

When classes were on break at university, I didn't celebrate, I traveled to new places. Couchsurfing, the act, and Couch Surfing the web site, were part of my magnetic compass, yes. More than that it was a promise: If I showed up open-hearted, strangers might meet me halfway. I wasn't chasing landmarks; I was collecting evidence the world believes in kindness. Yet I couldn't keep doing that forever. Someday soon my back will be too painful to carry heavy luggage. I would be older and unwanted. I had no idea how soon that day would come. Before I get to that part of the story let me talk more about travel.

Travel experiences hit deep in many places. In Muslim homes across Indonesia. Six of my eight months in Indonesia I spent with a family on Sumatra, in 2007, who folded me into dawn prayers and dusk laughter. We didn't trade theology; we traded presence. Their living room became a classroom where empathy replaced certainty, where silence spoke fluently, where I learned the difference between observing culture and being welcomed into it.

Their food rewired my body: Jackfruit still warm from the branch, greens pulled from soil minutes before supper. Flavor wasn't exotic; it was sane and truthful.

I carried that truth home, only to have it clash against fluorescent aisles of shrink-wrapped calories.



But coming back to America often felt like stepping off a quiet beach into a carnival. Cities flashed chaos, everything for sale, nothing that hugged back. Portland remained my waypoint, the city whose rain knew my name. I loved its gray lullabies but its desolate fractures also gave me nightmares.

Weeks of couch-hopping so I could have the chance to house-sit for strangers was fine for a certain age but it wasn't fine anymore. I couldn't handle or manage to do it anymore. I couldn't go on anymore. I was stuck. I had fallen through the cracks. Not completely through the cracks, but enough to know that my life had become a mess with no cleanup within reach. I felt completely stuck with one foot on one continent where I'm not a resident (Asia), and another place that I often despised but it is the only place where I am a resident (America). Furthermore, without being able to complete my university degree, I have little chance overseas. Countries in Asia were already cracking down on teaching without a degree and other grey areas.

Trying to survive alone in the U.S. alone on very little income made finishing my university degree seem effectively impossible. I cannot even afford rent. I have no family and nobody in America to help support any-

thing; let alone the full costs of university. The PTSD that I struggle with everyday is both real and perhaps curable but I haven't been able to get the cure yet.

From 2010 - 2022, during numerous calls with my father in Florida, he assured me that no matter what someday my partial childhood house would become my inheritance. The idea of owning property in America sounded like a lullaby. However, legal trickery swept the deed away. The house vanished, and with it the last conventional proof that I belonged anywhere.

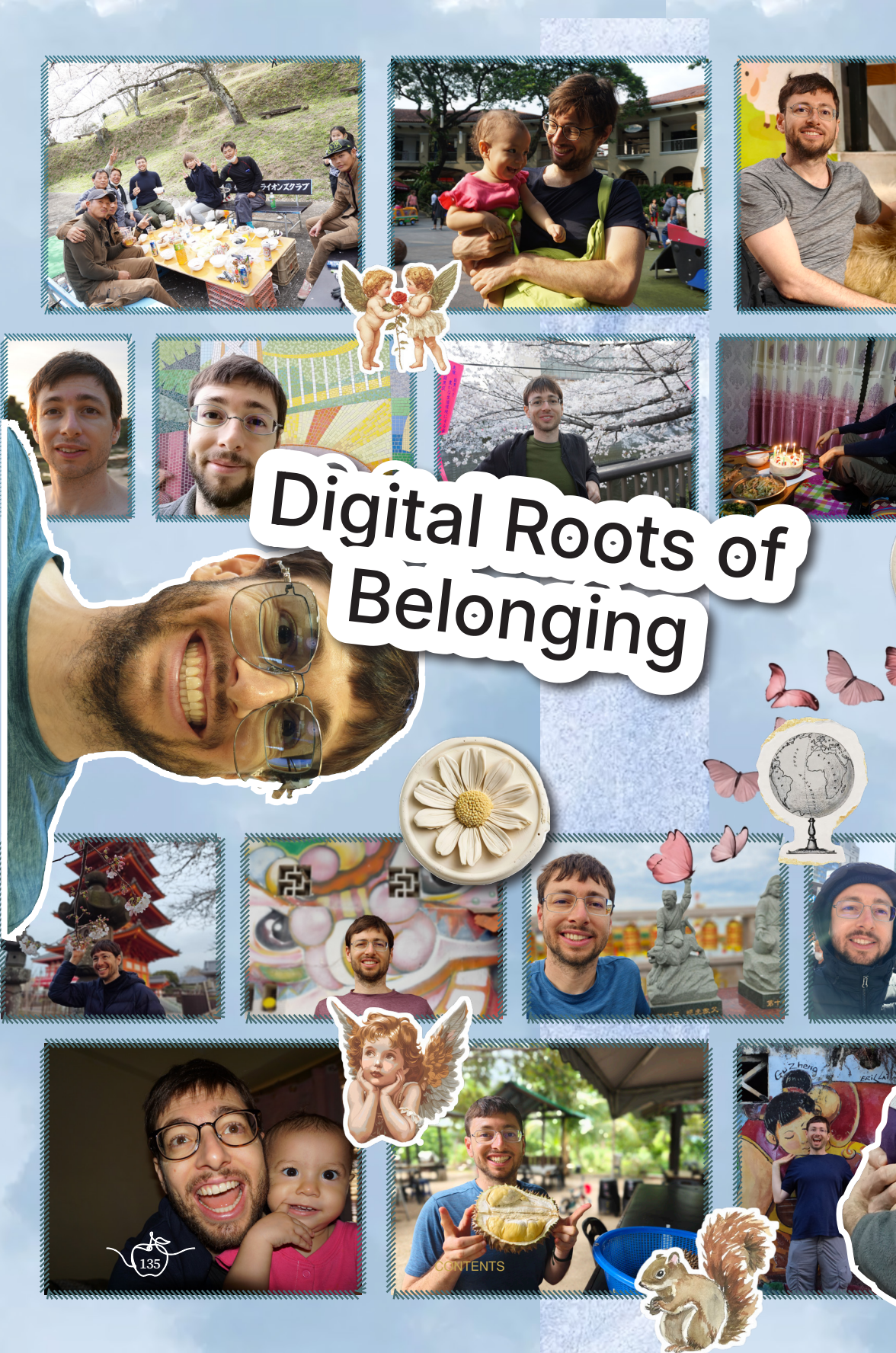
It's extremely hard to try to trust someone enough to depend on them. Especially when maybe at least 25% of the time you'll be fatefully matched with someone unkind, extremely greedy. They have the resources but don't care about you. Yet challenging life experience could also open a door if only you had that one person who could make things right. Over time, more people seem to be struggling. I feel the chances of life ever improving are evaporating before our very eyes. People are so wrapped up in self-survival and social media, politics, and everything else that has consumed all of our lives. Human kindness can be a kind of real estate. Some of us luck into this kind of real estate. Some of us will need to die alone and in poverty?

I own no deed. What I do own is a constellation of memories, sunsets from Manila rooftops, night buses

rolling through Guatemalan mountains, quiet prayers whispered in languages I still can't quite pronounce. I hope my legacy is for a life of meaning and purpose for my kids. It's likely nobody will ever know my name, let alone a life experience lived or the positive changes I tried to make in the world. Always trying to do the right thing. The thousands of strangers I stayed with were mainly transient friends. I wish they were not. Is there anybody who can hear my struggles and cries for help? I call out in any echo. Any hope at all for an opportunity?

Sometimes the kindness of one person. Perhaps a person you haven't spoken to in years could literally make the difference in an afternoon to change a broken life for the better. Giving a hand up? If you have the resources and you know this person still needs help, why not? I'm mindful of my burden and do not wish to overstay. I would promise to show my gratitude everyday and you should feel joy for helping someone who needs it. Alexis? Serena? Anyone?

Contents


Digital Roots of Belonging

Code: Knock, smile, trust
17
Sharing isn't a deficit

# Chapter 17

# Digital Roots of Belonging

Before I ever rang a stranger's doorbell, I logged into Bluelight, a glitchy forum where dial-up chords carried secrets across state lines. We were scattered insomniacs swapping playlists and survival tips, bonded by restless curiosity and the quiet pact to answer whenever someone typed, "I feel alone." Those pixelated nights taught me that family can be chosen, username by username. It's not a perfect kind of society and people often still get left behind.

Couchsurfing grew from that same seed of faith. What began as a travel hack mutated into a pulse: Knock, smile, trust. Each welcome mat felt like a test of whether the world still believed in kindness, and overwhelmingly, it did most of the time. I used that same fundamental creed as paint on my paintbrush when I was consciously crafting communities on social media.

Going back to Bluelight memories for a second. Crossing the United States from California to a driveway in New Jersey just to hug the Northeast Bluelight people. Snow greeted me a day later like silent fireworks, the first time my southern eyes had ever laid eyes on snow. We had a playful snowball romp and had a laugh as we crafted my first snowman together.

Costs started to pick up seemingly overnight after the Great Recession of 2007 - 2009. Then prices ballooned uncontrollably during the COVID pandemic, after greed and inflation supercharged basic necessities like shelter. I did the math: One month's rent of barely surviving in Portland equaled roughly three months of cheap travel.

I went back to the Philippines again in 2016 to reunite with my partner and daughter. We had a second daughter, Era. I wanted so much for my partner to be with me in America. It was too expensive and too challenging. I stayed in the Philippines as long as I could. I was an atheist in a deeply Catholic country. I was robbed multiple times. I started to have new health problems and Manila was seemingly making it worse. Seeing extreme poverty everyday and heavy pollution took a greater toll on my mental health. I watched helplessly as Duterte's government found ways to abuse the desperate. Besides my daughters, I couldn't find joy in the Philippines. I saw corruption. I saw very little progress. I saw older, richer people using their money

and influence to get whatever they wanted. The same all over. Duterte's War On Drugs killed thousands of people for a policy that should have been laid to rest in the 1980s, or never happened. My partner in the Philippines and I called it quits around 2018.

I had a new and different mental breakdown again in late 2018. Likely from raw, unprocessed mental anguish (PTSD). I started to experience constant, intrusive thoughts. I was also experiencing severe daily anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. I was beginning to experience depersonalization and derealization where my body felt completely detached from my mind and everything felt completely off. This was from a complete and utter mental break spiraling within.

I stayed in Taiwan for a while. While in Taiwan, I did meet someone special from Singapore. There have been stretches of time where I've gone back and forth between Taiwan - Philippines - Japan - Singapore - Malaysia - Vietnam on inexpensive flights. I was trying to survive. Singapore to hold a lover's hand. The Philippines to hug my daughters. Malaysia for low costs along with food that tastes like generosity simmered in spice. Japan's revisit to priceless sakura. One of the best ever trips to Japan, I was in Sapporo for the annual snow festival and twenty-four hours later I was barefoot on Ishigaki. One of the rare memories of enjoyable travel in recent years. Because in recent

years it has become about survival. I am unable to afford the prices in my own country where I reside, so I found it was cheaper to travel to places that are more affordable to visit family, and also to try to get by.

Adaptability has become both armor and skill. PTSD, anxiety, depression, they loosen their grip when I am having to adapt to an interesting culture, or figure out a foreign language, or when I need to get from point A to B having never done it before. When golden hour calls to remind me the world unwinds differently everywhere yet some places feel more hopeful than others. It doesn't mean that I'm allowed to live there or I have the right to be there. Which is why I'm always relegated to being a visitor, except for Portland which is the only place that I reside.

### *America's Future*

What future are our leaders making in America? Where people cannot afford basic necessities? Yet we're supposed to get by somehow. I own no deeds in America and trying to survive is not trivial. How do I utilize my constellation of memories, life experience, and immersions from across a brevity of cultures and places? I have a library of life experience. I have more stories than I have time or the ability to write. This book only gives a brief overview of I'd say about 5 or 10% of my life experience and travels. America may

have been different in the past, but in 2026, it feels like a gated community for the ignorant and wealthy.



Abroad, in some places, fresh fruits and vegetables don't cost an arm and a leg and strangers still believe sharing isn't a deficit. That contrast keeps my suitcase half-packed. I can tell people mind-blowing stories of things they may have never heard about before. If only more people were to ask me about my stories with genuine curiosity. I would love nothing more than to share my knowledge and life experience with people from the perspective of someone who has been through misfortune and also fortunate enough to amass a wealth of life experience. How to?

Contents

# 18

# Pandemic Road

Some chapters end mid-sentence

# Mountains exhale resilience

# Chapter 18

# Pandemic Road

I was in Singapore at the start of the COVID pandemic. It was unnerving but also peacefully quiet for a major cosmopolitan city during that time. I couldn't visit the Philippines, it was locked down like a prison and would remain locked down for like another two years. Once flights from Singapore became available I was allowed to return home to Portland.

Rent in Portland is more than many people can afford. The math wasn't mathing for me and I realized it would be cheaper to travel to areas that were open and wanted visitors. I did wait until the COVID vaccine became publicly available and I was one the first people in queue.

Originally I was only going to travel for a few weeks. A few weeks stretched into nearly a six-month,

8,000-mile loop around the American west. Every month I came back to Portland. Each month I had a different rental car. Rental cars were one of the few cheap things during the pandemic. Couchsurfing hosts in more conservative states opened their doors to me. From Utah's wind-chiseled arches to Montana's big-sky loneliness, I slept in spare bedrooms, backyard campers, and once, a trailer full to the brim by a confessed hoarder. I got myself to visit almost every national park in the American west during these massive roadtrips.

In New Mexico, I met a family living off solar panels after hospital bills ate their savings. In South Dakota, a laid-off teacher hosted me in exchange for help winterizing her trailer. We swapped stories over instant coffee that tasted of fear and hope in equal measure. Everywhere, tents sprouted behind supermarkets like unwanted flowers, proof that the line between housed and unhoused had thinned to a breath.

Government should be there to support ordinary people. The government is failing in this capacity, when there are thousands, even millions of people without stable housing. It should be healthcare and housing as two major rights for basic survival. Those are two things all people need and the government doesn't do much to help control costs. I would debate this point with anyone in real life but not here in this book. I'm only going to assert the obvious truth plainly.

Over the course of that half-year, I traveled through Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, California, Montana, the Dakotas, Washington, and Oregon. Each destination brought its own beauty and character. From the massive national parks of Utah to the coastal cliffs of California, I immersed myself in nature. But this wasn't just tourism. These landscapes and communities gave me a new way to understand my country. I saw firsthand how many Americans were struggling, just like me, with unstable housing, and lacking access to healthcare, and a growing sense of isolation. Yet kindness threaded through the hardship. Strangers tucked some small gas money into my jacket pocket, pressed homemade bread into my hands, and trusted me to watch their kids while they hunted for one more gig. Those gestures stitched a patchwork safety net good enough for this particular occasion. However, you cannot mistake this type of patchwork as a replacement for sound government policies.

By summer-2021, Asia's borders still felt like locked gates, so I scanned a world map for countries whispering "open." Turkey nodded; Georgia, the country waved me closer. After some planning and recovery, I took a flight to Turkey. I spent enough time in Turkey to begin to understand the country and due to the exchange rate I thoroughly traveled on a tight budget. I fell in love with the idea of visiting Georgia, a coun-

try that I had always wanted to visit. Which at the time was one of the cheapest countries in the world to visit. I stepped onto the sun-bleached pavement in Tbilisi, the air thick with church bells and Wi-Fi signals. Cobbled alleys led to jazz bars, and Soviet-era balconies leaned like tired storytellers. Locals folded me into their days: Khachapuri breakfasts, wine poured from plastic jugs, and low costs that for once fit my budget. I fed stray dogs across Georgia. I visited so many towns and cities across Georgia. Hiking the Caucasus, I felt the mountains exhale centuries of struggle and resilience into my lungs.

Just as grounding took root, an old foe resurfaced, Recurrent Corneal Erosion in my right eye, a mostly genetic condition in my case. Each flare felt like glass shards under my eyelid. I had a procedure scheduled back home in Portland to do something about it.

Leaving Georgia hurt like closing a book mid-sentence. I boarded the first plane cradling gratitude and grief in the same carry-on. Ahead lay hospitals, waiting rooms, and the slow work of recovery. However, if I knew the tragedy of what would await me, or the potential risks of the "small" medical procedure for my eye, then I would have stayed in Georgia longer.

This chapter isn't a postcard of landscapes; it's a record of fault lines, economic, emotional, and biological. It's proof that movement can be cheaper than

standing still, that strangers are sometimes able to hold the scaffolding temporarily when systems collapse, and that the next horizon isn't always a distant peak but rather the patient glow of a medical clinic hallway.

Contents

Vision fades, will remains

# 19

# Through the Lens of Pain

# Every blink, a battle

# Chapter 19

# Through the Lens of Pain, A Medical Trial

Up until now, my story has run on movement: Borders cleared, couches bedded, sky after unfamiliar sky. Chapter 19, drags the horizon inward, shrinking it to the size of a wounded eye.

Recurrent Corneal Erosion sounds clinical, three dry words. Imagine waking from sleep and feeling a razor tug at the inside of your eye, as if the surface is velcroed to your eyelid and someone tries to rip them apart. The pain is white-hot, whole-eye / headed, and eerily silent; you don't scream because air can't make it past the shock. Episodes can last minutes or weeks; stealing focus, sleep, and any illusion that you have had of being able to control your senses.

My first "erosions" in that delicate corneal layer of the eye appeared in 2015. I tried every over-the-counter

fix, gels, drops, humidifiers, pillows, altered sleep positions. Seeking help steered me to Portland's Casey Eye Institute. Specialists there recommended a Superficial Keratectomy: Scrape away the faulty corneal epithelium and let it regrow. "Routine," they promised. "High success, minimal risk." Infection? Long-term damage? They shook their heads no, saying that this is "the safest" and "the easiest procedure" they do there.

The left eye went first. Recovery hurt, but time reduced inflammation in the weeks following the procedure. Hope bloomed, I could finally sleep without fear. Two months later, I planned to have the same procedure done on the right eye. I was not made aware of potential risks and not informed that there were alternatives to this specific procedure, only to find that out later.

Less than thirty-six hours after that second Superficial Keretectomy, hope caught fire. I woke to stabbing agony, eyelid glued shut with blood and mucus, vision clouded like frosted glass. My overseas partner dialed the clinic again and again for help. Staff insisted it was normal post-op inflammation. Only when my pain left me blinded did they squeeze me in, the day before Thanksgiving, senior doctors were gone. A resident student doctor glanced, diagnosed iritis (the wrong diagnosis), and handed me a prescription for more steroid drops. The wrong medicine.

By the next morning the pain, discharge from the eye, and cloudiness in the eye had advanced like wildfire. A senior physician finally examined me and uttered the words that still makes my stomach knot: Serious eye threatening Endophthalmitis. One case in fifty thousand, they claimed. A roulette wheel, I never received informed consent to play. The doctor said in a raised voice that now we're fighting to save the loss of your entire eye to this serious infection!

Emergency treatment came as two specially compounded antibiotic drops, one vial opaque yellow, the other clear as panic, administered every hour around the clock 24 hours per day. I probably should have been admitted into hospital. For two weeks, my phone alarm rang every hour; I stumbled in darkness, prying lids open to flood the 10 out of 10 painful wounds with the correct medicines that burned like betrayal. Exhaustion blurred days into a single, aching vigil.

Eventually the infection surrendered, but victory came scrawled with scars. My cornea permanently warped and scarred in my central vision. Vision completely diminished to almost nothing, depth perception faltered. Crossing a street felt like guessing the future. Doctors spoke of corneal transplant, a partial fix, but transplants require stability: Permanent housing. I don't think I'll ever be able to get that needed corneal transplant to see properly again.

Questions echo louder than answers: Why no thorough risk briefing? Why was a resident left alone with a post-op emergency? Why were my desperate phone calls after the procedure gone wrong met with scripted reassurances instead of urgency? Why did the hospital never take responsibility for the misdiagnosis?

Later I reached out to medical injury attorneys who all said roughly the same thing. . “Infection?” “That sounds tough.” Infection cases are nearly impossible to win regardless. I’m sorry to hear this. I don’t have the resources available to take your case. “ The one attorney in Oregon who almost took my case told me eventually that he could not due to a conflict of interest. That conflict of interest? Turns out he plays golf on the weekend with the doctor in question (the one who did my procedure). He didn’t want to upset the doctor because he also needs that doctor’s testimony for other cases. Without government resources for medical injuries leading to permanent disabilities, it seems I’m out of luck, and unable to get the financial support I need. In a country where some people luck out with million dollar payments literally over spilled coffee and temporary burns, I would soon be made to realize there was no path to retribution for being forced to give up half of my sight forever.

Living with my disabled aftermath means reading less, navigating stairs sideways, gauging trust in une-

ven light. It means waking to ghost pain everyday, blinking to be sure the world hasn't dimmed further. Still everyday I open that damaged eye, I choose forward. Not heroically, simply because forward is the only direction time allows. Inflammation in the affected eye has been non-stop for years.

This chapter holds more pain than hope, stitched with real life misfortune. Travel taught me systems fail; and sometimes kindness patches holes. Human biology means sometimes the human body fails, and sometimes a medical injury can leave you blind forever without recourse. I move ahead, one blurred street sign, one careful step, one small victory of vision at a time, carrying the lesson that even when sight fractures, perspective can still widen.

Contents

Bodies break, spirit bends

# 20 Crohn's Disease

Pain rewrites the map

Illness is not defeat

# Chapter 20

# Crohn's Disease and the Unseen Battles Within

Just as I was learning to navigate a world half-blurred by eye damage, another frontline opened, this one buried deep inside my gut, invisible to everyone but me.

For years my stomach had whispered warnings: Random stabs of pain, waves of nausea, exhaustion that sleep couldn't fix. Doctors shrugged. I tweaked diets, swallowed nutritional supplements, convinced myself it was merely stress. Then a well-meaning physician told me to simplify my meals and pause my anti-inflammatory regimen. Within days my body revolted. Food became the enemy, each bite triggering cramps and nauseous pain sharp enough to cause me to kneel down like being hit with a sucker punch. My joints flared, fatigue draped over me like wet wool. It felt like my entire system was powering down.

An ER visit finally snapped the standoff. Scans, blood draws, and a colonoscopy revealed the culprit hiding where scopes are needed to reach: Crohn's disease, an autoimmune ambush chewing ulcers into my small intestine. Diagnosis tasted like relief laced with dread, at least the pain had a name, but the name came with no cure.

### *A Diagnosis Made Abroad*

At the time, I was visiting my partner and my children in southeast Asia, and staying in Singapore when the worst of the symptoms hit. Medical treatment abroad, especially for complex autoimmune conditions, is expensive. I quickly learned that the biologic medication I needed, one of the few safe and effective treatments, was not obtainable because one or two doses costs as much as a Tesla. The injectables must also be refrigerated.

The situation left me with no choice: I had to return to Portland immediately, where I could access ongoing care. I tried to get back sooner but I was too ill to fly and was advised not to fly immediately for medical reasons. Without proper treatment, Crohn's can lead to severe complications, including malnutrition, bowel obstruction, and even death. This was no longer about discomfort, it was about life or death. The doctors advised me to stay in Singapore until the tempo-

rary medicines could temper the major Crohn's flare I was experiencing.

### *Redefining Mobility, Crohn's Rewired Every Plan*

Crohn's disease now has had to redefine how I can live, travel, and think about my future. Every journey now requires careful planning: Carrying and keeping irreplaceable medication, managing strict dietary limitations, preparing for emergencies. I can't eat like I used to. I can't push my body without consequences. My mental health, already burdened by trauma, anxiety, and depression, now carried the added weight of chronic illness. A litany of letters from doctors and a tally of specialists within bus or taxi distance. Pushing my body, once a badge of wanderlust, now courts days of agony. Anxiety is a major trigger for me in both directions.

What's worse is knowing how many others face similar struggles with less support. In America, the richest country in the world, access to medication and healthcare is fragile. At any moment, political decisions or insurance policy decisions could leave patients without the drugs they need to stay alive. Access to medicines feels like walking a tightrope strung under politics and at the discretion of for-profit insurance companies. Insurance denied access to my prescribed Crohn's medicine so I had to make an appeal directly with the manufacturing company for access to the life

saving medicine that keeps my immune system from destroying my gastrointestinal tracts.

Still, the illness has taught me a quieter form of resilience. On flare-ups, when pain knots my abdomen and fatigue turns limbs to sandbags, I practice a slower kind of lifestyle, one measured in careful breaths and small victories: A meal that stays down, a morning without nausea, the simple grace of walking blocks without extreme pain. It's rather unpredictable as there is no way to know when a flare might strike. So life has become less predictable than ever.

Living with Crohn's, and with a scarred cornea, means carrying twin reminders that bodies are agreements easily broken. I navigate life within a body that constantly threatens to betray me. Yet every day I witness, every conversation I manage without wincing, feels like a whispered rebellion: I'm still here but I am now in bad shape and permanently disabled in a few ways.

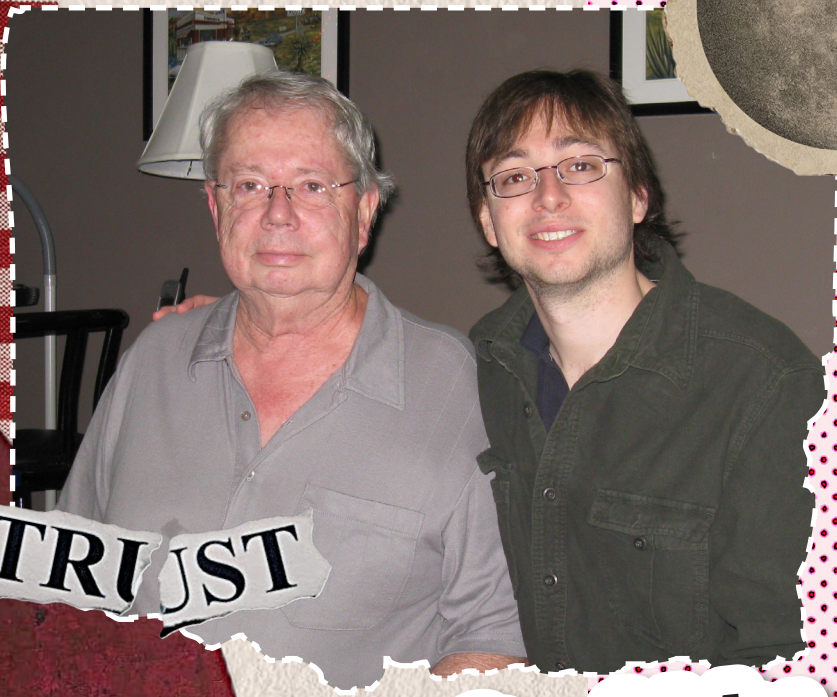
In some ways, these twin battles, with vision loss and Crohn's, represent more than personal medical struggles. They are part of a broader commentary on resilience, on the limits of modern medicine, and on what it means to persist without guarantees. This is survival, redefined.

I don't own much property, but I hold stories of strangers who opened doors, doctors who finally lis-

tened, and daughters and a partner who, I hope, want to hug me gently when I'm able to visit. Those connections form a net to catch me some days my body tries to slip away.

This chapter isn't just about disease; it's about persistence without guarantees. It's learning to map detours when the main road collapses, to find a small dignity inside limitations, to keep moving, sometimes across oceans, sometimes only from bed to couch, because forward, however small the step, is the only direction that keeps hope and insight?

Contents




# The Theft of My Father

## 21

Her pen erased my name

The law looked away

## Chapter 21

# The Theft of My Father, Cautionary Tale of Elder Abuse

While my own body was staging revolts, eyes scarring, intestines burning, another crisis unfolded thousands of miles away, one I could neither outrun nor mend with medicine. My father, already fragile under the fog of dementia, became prey.

He had always strongly desired to live alone at "the house" since the divorce. He never wanted to be better organized for the inevitable or to prepare for things in the future. I tried to help him. Mostly he fought with me to let him be. Dementia scattered the dad I knew. Into that confusion stepped a caretaking / cleaning company he'd trusted for years, familiar faces. They introduced my dad to a business woman who spoke in soothing tones and carried legal documents the way nurses carry blankets. She persuaded him to sign over power of attorney. Almost immediately, she changed

the “Pay On Death” instructions on his financial accounts from my name to her name. I was my dad’s next-of-kin. This alone should have raised major red flags.

Then came a barrage of scam calls. Apparently, scammers posing as my “girlfriend” told my dad I was dead or hospitalized. He was confused and frightened. These calls were clearly fake, mispronounced names, illogical stories, and yet, they shook him deeply. One caller apparently swore I’d died in a car crash; another insisted I was in an ICU begging for money. They called him at night, when dementia sharpens fear. Also disturbing, the scammers had my old phone number, the one my father knew. My dad likely gave the number to them or they simply found it in public records. It was as though someone was trying to drive a wedge between us, and it worked. Meanwhile texts hit my old number, the one Dad knew, repeating the same lies in reverse: Your father is dying, why aren’t you here? Someone was building a wall of panic between us brick-by-brick. What the hell was going on?

Instead of questioning the callers, or feeling sympathy for what was happening, the woman with power of attorney turned suspicion on me. She must have known better. My father, already struggling with mental capacity from dementia, was convinced. She assumed full control, and the house he had promised

to me, the only stable piece of property our family had, was sold. His trust cracked; her control sealed. The house he'd promised me, the last relic of stability in our family, went on the market and vanished into someone else's deed.

I rang every hotline in Florida: Adult protective services, elder abuse hotline, the police. Each conversation ended in bureaucratic shrugging. No one helped. Despite clear signs of cognitive decline and financial manipulation by the power of attorney, no investigation has yet to be conducted. No protections of my father were enforced. The power of attorney then decided to cut off all communication between my dad and his only close family: Me, his only son.

Watching from Portland felt like drowning in slow motion. Biologic injections kept my gut calm while my heart punched at my ribs. I replayed old memories of my dad clearly telling me things I still remembered vividly, and yet this power of attorney was doing the exact opposite of what my dad wished and what was best for him. I have no idea where my dad is or what has happened to him. My dad was coerced and lied to for the benefit of a greedy, sketchy power of attorney.

This isn't just my heartbreak; it's a warning. Power of attorney, unsupervised, can become a loaded weapon. Dementia turns memories to smoke, and vultures know the scent. Our elder-care system asks victims to

recognize their own abuse. Within days the abuser's signatures are dry and my dad's assets are gone with limited ways to make things right.

Contents

# Fractured Light

"In the end,
we'll all become stories."

- Margaret Atwood

Every flash is a silent siren
I focus on the light that remains
22

## Chapter 22

# Fractured Light, The Retinal Detachment Saga

Eighteen months later, just as inflammation in my damaged eye quieted, flashes of light and drifting shadows invaded the same eye. Retinal tear, they said. Multiple tears! I had to have the tears in the back of my eye "lasered" the same day. I was in Singapore, visiting my partner. We thought we were done with emergencies for a while. This emergency came almost out of nowhere. It started as a flicker, one pinprick flash skimming the edge of my vision like a single firefly in a dark field. Easy to ignore. Then another. And another. Each spark whispered the same warning my mind refused to hear: Something inside your eye is tearing loose.

I later came to learn, and had no choice but to accept, that I live with lattice degeneration, a hereditary thinning of the retina spread like fragile lace across all four quadrants of both eyes. Doctors later explained the

risks: Tears, detachment, blindness. I nodded, filed the information away, and kept watch as new symptoms started. The corneal infection of 2021-2022, and almost two years of inflammation, may have weakened the lattice in the eye further. Cause and effect blur when pain layers on pain, yet the timeline feels almost too neat to be coincidence.

One morning a cloud of darkness drifted into my right eye: A vitreous hemorrhage, blood flooding vision. Shapes pulsed in and out like ink dropped in water. Days later, September 2024, the retina finally tore free causing a large and fast moving retinal detachment. Imagine the wallpaper of your sight peeling off the wall while you're still inside the room.

Emergency rooms move fast when the words "retinal detachment" are spoken. Surgeons performed a vitrectomy, removing much of the vitreous gel that tugged at the retina, then cinched a silicone scleral buckle around the globe of my eye, tight enough to hold, too tightly placed to forget. Technically successful, they said. Practically, it traded darkness for constant distortion and a dull ache that rides shotgun in everything I do. Post-surgical recovery was slow, disorienting, and filled with frustration. My right eye is now functionally impaired.

The once-dominant eye is now a glitching camera: With depth perception gone, straight lines bending,

phantom shadows flickering where no one else sees them. Crossing a street became choreography. Reading requires strategic tilts of the page. I constantly navigate around flashes and shadows that no one else can see. Each task, from reading a label, using a screen, to crossing a street, requires new strategies, deliberate movements, and cautious steps.

What amplifies the challenge is knowing that my left eye, the so-called "good" eye, is also at risk. The left eye, my lifeline, carries the same lattice map. Early posterior vitreous detachment has begun: The vitreous gel loosening its grip, threatening the same disaster. Specialists debate prophylactic lasering of the lattice. Some argue for; others warn it could spark new issues. No medical consensus, only informed consent disguised as roulette.

Psychologically, every new countless flash daily is a siren. I observe distortions like weather reports: Squall in upper periphery, calm at center except for the Epiretinal Membrane, one lower-right section is a complete blur with no vision at all. Anything could happen anytime. Outwardly I look the same; but inwardly I walk a scary minefield of maybes and unknowns.

Vision isn't just sight, it's orientation, autonomy, recognition. Losing it feels like misplacing pieces of myself: The ease of reading a loved one's expression,

the casual joy of catching a ball, the simple trust of moving through space unguarded. I mourn those pieces even as I try to figure out any new ways to try and compensate; for which there are very few, if any.

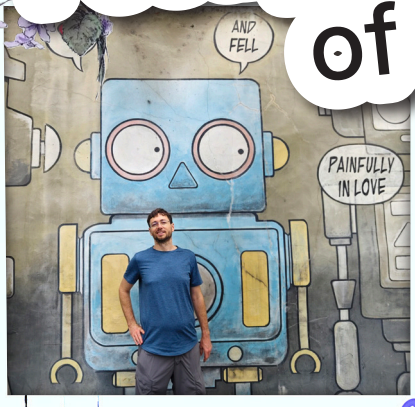
Public awareness of retinal health is nearly invisible. High myopia, family history, systemic diseases, millions hover at risk, yet few know the signs. A flash here, a curtain of floaters there, and life can change forever for the worse before they reach an exam room.

My journey is far from over. My right eye remains severely dysfunctional. My left eye teeters on a precipice. Still, I practice gratitude for what remains: The way morning light diffuses through curtains, the outline of one of my daughter's smiles, the fact that words, though blurrier, still arrange themselves into meaning sometimes.

Retinal detachment taught me that earthquakes can arrive without warning, that preparedness is mostly hope made practical, and that resilience sometimes looks like squinting toward the future even when the outlines won't sit still. I keep watch, I adapt, and I choose, again and again, to try to focus on the light that remains rather than the darkness that threatens.

Contents

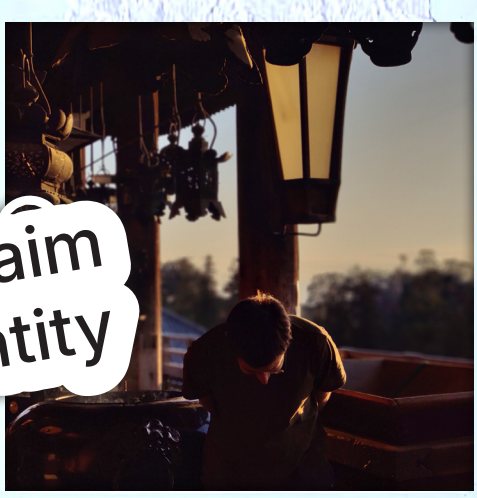
# Poetry in the Wake of Pain



23

CONTENTS

Vision fades, voice remains



Words reclaim stolen identity

that love us, never leave us.

# Chapter 23

# Poetry in the Wake of Pain

When the world narrowed to medication alarms and eye-drop schedules, poetry slipped back into my mind as a familiar hobby, soft, steady, distractions. I first sketched lyrics in junior high, scrawling feelings across lined notebooks I kept hidden. Music and writing offered me the earliest tools for expressing feelings I couldn't articulate aloud. Melody made room for feelings I was too frightened to speak. Years of childhood trauma, emotional abuse, financial instability, and housing insecurity diverted my energy toward basic survival. When you're fighting for your life, creative pursuits often must be pushed to the side.

Pain, ironically, reopened that door. In waiting rooms and on long rides to low-cost clinics, lines began popping into my mind. At first I dismissed them. Then one night, alone under fluorescent hospital lights, I reached for my phone and let the lines tumble out.

They weren't pretty; they were raw, splintered grammar, loops of repetition, rhythms that stuttered like my anxious pulse. Those words appear in my poetry books, and those words are shared by me.

Vision loss made every stanza a contest. Corneal scars blurred letters, retinal surgery warped depth. My vision is gnarly without any good solutions. Each finished draft became a small accomplishment, proof that my body can limit me now, but it can not completely silence me yet.

My approach to poetry is unorthodox and deliberately freeform. I don't write to impress academics or conform to tradition, of course. I write in free verse because life rarely moves in a straight line. Repetition, dissonance, broken rhythms, these mirror trauma, how it loops back unexpectedly. My hobby revolves around themes of loss, dislocation, alienation, euphoria, love, and the painstaking work of rebuilding identity after it's been discolored and fractured.

Physical limitations have made writing more arduous. Years of corneal damage and a retinal detachment have severely impaired my vision. Tasks that once took hours now take days. No good solutions with current technology for this particular predicament. Someone should set up a GoFundMe page but I doubt anyone would donate. Despite obstacles, every poem

or chapter completed now feels like a small but meaningful act of defiance, a way to say, "I'm here."

In a world that often feels chaotic and out of our control, there are ways to give a shit and make a difference; to show someone you care. My brand of poetry is one of the few realms where I still exercise agency. Even when my body rebels against me, I can choose my words, shape them into meaning, and hope someday for meaning. I don't write poetry for validation. I write to process, understand and connect. If even one person reads my work and feels less alone, or reaches out to connect with me in a positive way, then the effort has been worthwhile.

I know that some people might find my poetry too personal, repetitive, amateurish, or aesthetically unpleasant. That's okay. Not everything is meant for everyone. But I hope that in these lines, some readers can glimpse the truth of a life experience, particularly the invisible struggles that many carry in silence.

Travel once mapped my outer world and still does to a lesser degree. Poetry now maps the inner terrain, the scar tissue, the stubborn hope, the quiet corners where joy can germinate. With each piece I try to reclaim, a shard of self, the past tried to steal.

So as Part One of A Life Experience: The Shaun Apple Story closes, these poems stand as open windows. If

you look through and find your own reflection, know that the glass was polished by gratitude. Thank you for reading, for listening, for staying long enough to feel the pulse behind the words.

With Tenderness and Persistence.

Love,

(The) Shaun Apple (Story)

Contents

# SHAUN J APPLE

Shaun J Apple is a poet and memoirist whose work spans 25 years and 100 countries. He is the founder of Love Across Borders Publishing, the literary imprint he has run since 2003, and the author of the memoir A Life Experience: The Shaun Apple Story, an account of a life lived in motion, across languages, and without a fixed home.

His catalog now runs to more than two dozen titles: poetry collections, memoir, and hybrid nonfiction composed over more than two decades, not seasons. He works in the spaces between long stays and departures, and the result holds together as one voice across many books.

Before the imprint, he helped build some of the internet's largest communities, spaces now read by tens of millions, and spent years in harm-reduction work, close to people at their most precarious. He is now developing a software platform centered on lived experience. The same attention runs through all of it: a refusal to look away.

He writes with PTSD, with Crohn's disease, and with partial vision loss from an inherited retinal disease, two retinal detachments, and surgical complications. The impairment is permanent. So is the work. Much of this catalog was made to survive bad weeks, and it has.

Based in Portland, Oregon, for 20 years, Shaun J Apple now lives and works between Asia and the United States. He speaks conversational Thai, Mandarin, and Vietnamese, and is the father of three children living across two continents.

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lifeofexperience.com

CONTENTS

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A LIFE EXPERIENCE

# Index of Openings

Every chapter by its first line, in alphabetical order


After the storm chronicled in ‘The Sakura and... 15

At seventeen, right after finishing high... 3

Back in Daytona Beach, I spent many nights... 4

Before I ever rang a stranger’s doorbell, I... 17

By 2007, my mind felt like a cracked... 10

Eighteen months later, just as inflammation in... 22

The end of my marriage in Thailand didn’t... 9

Following the catastrophic unraveling of my... 14

I didn’t come back to Fiji because of some... 6

I was in Singapore at the start of the COVID... 18

Imagine trying to gather every place your soul... 16

Just as I was learning to navigate a world... 20

Leaving Fiji felt like peeling myself away from... 7

Los Angeles had already shown me how a single... 5

My childhood started off as a kid of Jewish... 2

Over the course of five years, I cultivated... 13

Picture a tidy neighborhood, the kind with... 1

Portland is my home and home base. 11

Up until now, my story has run on movement... 19

Upon returning to Portland, I entered a phase... 12

When the world narrowed to medication alarms... 23

While my own body was staging revolts, eyes... 21

The year was 2004. 8

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CONTENTS

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**With gratitude, Shaun**

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The book documents a life shaped by strife, steadied by empathy, and grounded in lived experience. These pages attend to retinal detachment, Crohn's disease, and a father lost. The story follows years of advocacy and travel, and a search for home in motion. The prose is exact and humane. Every claim has a source. If you have ever had to start again, start here. Read it for the story. Keep it for strength. A life tested in private, shared in public.

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